

**MOSES AND JOSHUA  
FOUNDERS OF THE NATION**

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This is VOLUME THREE of  
**THE BIBLE IN HISTORY**  
*A Contemporary Companion to the Bible*

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# Moses and Joshua "Founders of the Nation

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and A. Manson

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# **CONTENTS**

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Preface

Introduction

1. Moses Makes his Appearance in the History of Israel
2. The Early Hidden Life of Moses
3. Moses' Sojourn in Midian
4. The Ten Plagues of Egypt
5. Israel comes out of Egypt (about 1220 B.C.)
6. En route for Sinai (about 1220 B.C.)
7. The Covenant on Sinai
8. The Long Halt at Kadesh
9. Marches and Counter-marches
10. Moses' Testament and Death
11. Joshua Establishes Israel in the Promised Land

**12. Historical Conclusions**

**Select Bibliography**

**Index**

## PREFACE

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The Bible is a single book in which the pattern of God's work in his world can be traced through two thousand years of human history. There is a single pattern running through it all, and fundamentally it is a simple pattern. The complexity comes from the complexity of human history.

But the Bible is also a collection of books. Some of them grew out of folk tales, and stories from the nation's past, which were handed down from father to son, or told round the pilgrims' camp fires at the places where the people went to worship. Some of the books were written by men who can be named and placed in their historical situation, and some are anonymous and can only be given a firm date with difficulty. The whole collection grew slowly over many centuries, and was repeatedly edited and rearranged, until it reached the form in which we now have it.

This means that the Bible has never been a book which could be read without help. Even in New Testament times, people found parts of it obscure. Customs which are taken for granted, and ways of life which are accepted without question by people who have never known anything different, may be strange to the later reader and difficult to understand. This is more than ever true in our own times, when the society in which we live has changed so much, even during the last hundred years.

This present series of books is for use as a Companion to the Bible. They are not a substitute for the Bible, for nothing can take the place of the Bible itself. It impresses itself on those who read it seriously in a way that no other book can. Some of the difficulties about reading the Bible have been due to the way in which it has usually been printed. Many of these are overcome in the Jerusalem Bible, a translation in contemporary English which is used in this series. In the Jerusalem Bible the text is presented by dividing the books into sections, and providing headings and footnotes.

The aim of this present series of books is to help people to understand the divine revelation. It presents the Bible in the historical circumstances in which it developed. The men and women who were so acutely aware of God's active presence in their lives were all people of their times. Their experiences were the same as the experiences of their neighbours and fellow-countrymen. They earned their living by the same skills and trades, and their thoughts were expressed in the language used by everyone around them. To understand how God was revealing himself to these people, we must share their experiences as far as we can, and know what was happening in the world in which they lived.

Using the findings of archaeology and of historical research, the books in this series show the circumstances and the environment in which God made himself known. During recent years great advances have been made in our knowledge of the Near East during the period when the Bible was written, but these advances have only been possible because of the foundations laid patiently by scholars for more than a hundred years.

This series of books does not attempt to record all of the most recent finds, for new discoveries often have to be examined with caution before there can be

certainty about their significance. Only those views which are accepted by a wide range of scholars are used here. It is impressive and reassuring to see how far the discoveries of the archaeologists and historians have confirmed the authenticity of details given in the Bible. Again and again, objects have been discovered, and sites have been excavated, which have confirmed the picture given by the Bible itself. There are many hindrances to archaeological work in the Near East. Political frontiers are often real barriers, and many important sites are still centres of worship where a thorough investigation is not possible. But we can be confident that new discoveries, as they are confirmed and analysed, will deepen our understanding of the times when the foundations of our religion were laid.

It is sometimes thought that books such as these should attempt to give the historical background to the Bible without any mention of God. This is impossible. The Bible is history, but it is also sacred history. It is history viewed and written with the knowledge that God is the active source of all history, and that all events are part of the movement towards the final consummation which God has willed. There is a pattern in the events of history, and God shows himself through this pattern. The events will not make sense, nor will they be worth studying, unless we see them from the point of view of the people who found God in them. We cannot make sense of the events if we leave God out.

The modern reader is sometimes surprised by the strange ways in which ancient historians presented their material, but much of this strangeness comes from the way in which ancient authors set about their task. Many of the writers of the Bible felt that their main responsibility was to preserve the traditions and the accounts of the events with as little alteration as possible. They

were 'scribes' rather than authors. They copied out whatever information they could find, or selected the best descriptions and the parts that they thought mattered most. Then they stitched the pieces together without changing the words or the style.

They collected their information wherever they could find it, so their work contains poetry, epics, fiction, official chronicles, anecdotes, family and tribal memoirs, royal decrees, codes of law, letters, rules for priests. These, and many others, are the kind of sources which historians use in any age; they are the raw material of history, and without them the historian would be helpless. But in the ancient historian's writings this raw material has a marked effect on the way in which the history is written. There is much repetition and, sometimes, contradiction, when the 'author' uses two versions of the same event. But there is also a vivid immediacy about it all which helps us to come close to the people who took part in the event and to appreciate the effect it had upon them.

The account is presented to us in the people's own words, so we find that we can share more easily in their experiences, and appreciate more easily their point of view. It is the point of view of a people who recognised God's active presence, and who responded to his presence with worship.

Occasionally we can detect a further motive which has shaped some of the books of the Bible. The biblical writers were never mere historians. They only wrote about the past if it could throw light on their present situation. They wanted to show how God had acted in the past, so that the people of their own times could see God's presence and power at work in their own lives. So the biblical historians selected from the material

available, and then arranged it so that the lessons were as obvious as it was possible to make them.

When we read these passages we are seeing the events of history through the eyes of men who frequently were writing about those events many generations after they had occurred. The books they wrote were expressions of the faith of the men who wrote them, and they were written to strengthen the faith of the people who read them. They have more to say about that faith than they have about the historical details of the events on which that faith was built.

Sometimes the books of the Bible contain deliberate anachronisms. This can be seen, for example, in some of the words and actions attributed to Moses. Moses had a greater influence on the Hebrew people than any other man. Later, in times of urgent need or of national reform, it was only natural for men to ask themselves what Moses would have done if he had been faced with their problems. The action taken, or the programme of reform, was then recorded as if Moses himself had foreseen the situation and had legislated for it. This is why so much of the law is written as if it had been given by Moses.

The men who wrote in this way were expressing an important truth. Whenever the nation was unfaithful to God, it was because it had forgotten the principles which Moses had taught to his generation of Hebrews. Those principles lay at the heart of the Hebrew faith, but the people of each new generation had to apply them to the changing circumstances of their times. The convention of making Moses the author of all their laws was the clearest way of showing that those laws were expressions of the central traditions of the nation.

The people of the Bible recognised the thread of God's revelation in the ordinary events of their lives. This series

of books shows what those events were, and how that thread fits into its historical background. Each book may be read on its own, but the books are also linked together to form a continuous exposition and elucidation of the way in which God has made himself known through the Bible. The titles in the series are:

- Volume 1: ABRAHAM, LOVED BY GOD
- Volume 2: ISAAC AND JACOB, GOD'S CHOSEN ONES
- Volume 3: MOSES AND JOSHUA, FOUNDERS OF THE NATION
- Volume 4: DAVID AND THE FOUNDATION OF JERUSALEM
- Volume 5: SOLOMON THE MAGNIFICENT
- Volume 6: THE DESTRUCTION OF THE KINGDOM
- Volume 7: THE REBIRTH OF ISRAEL
- Volume 8: JESUS THE GALILEAN
- Volume 9: JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES
- Volume 10: THE PASCHAL COMMUNITY
- Volume 11: THE CHURCH OF PENTECOST
- Volume 12: ST PAUL AND THE CHURCH

Each book contains the necessary maps, diagrams and illustrations for the period with which it is concerned. The reader is also recommended to use the chronological table, the maps and the general information printed after the New Testament in the Jerusalem Bible Standard Edition.

Joseph Rhymer,  
Editor of the English Language Edition.

B.C. 1900

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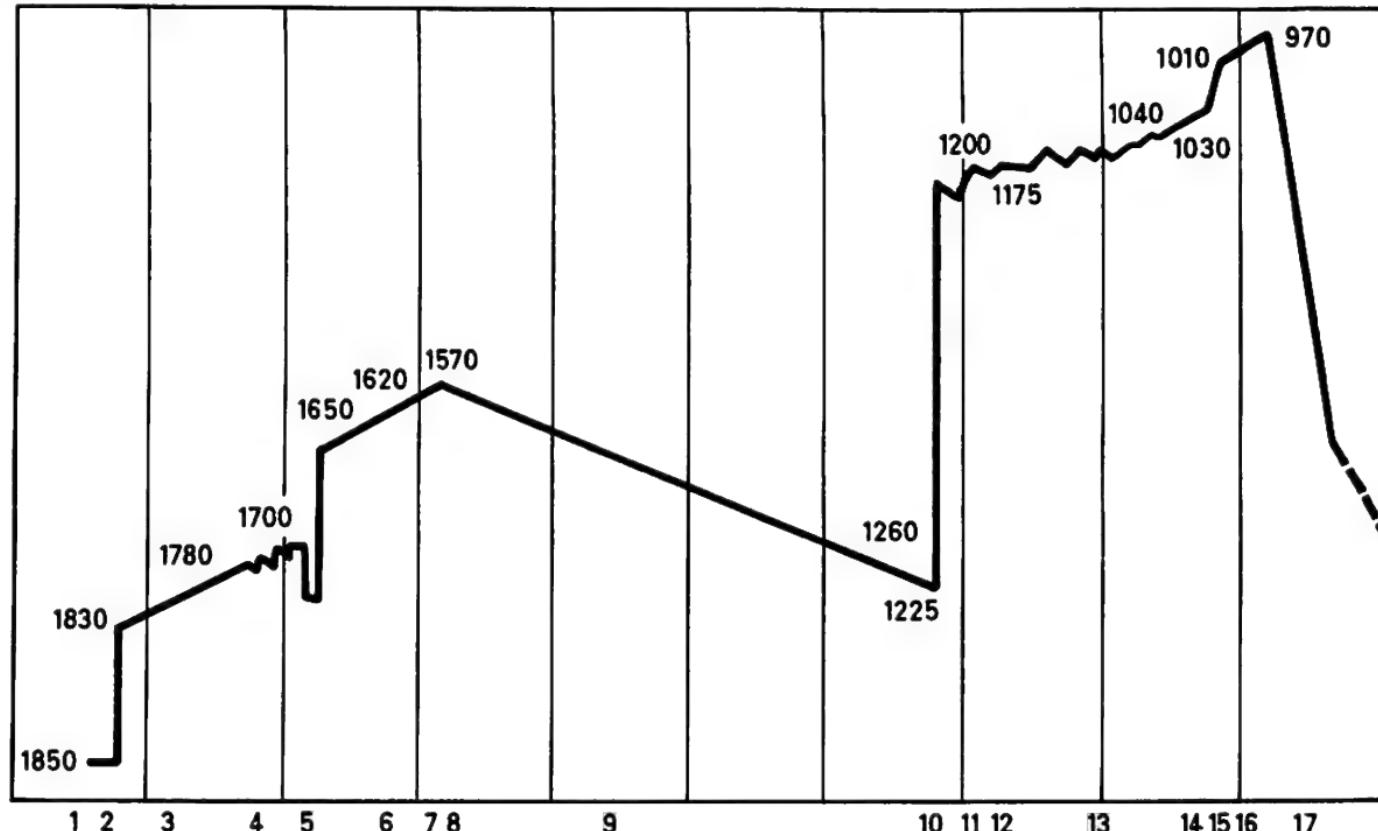
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## **GRAPH OF THE SPIRITUAL ASCENT OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL**

The only purpose of this outline is to give a general idea of the spiritual development of the people of Israel. After Joshua (1200–1175) the graph sums up the historical sequence which will be dealt with in later works in this series of volumes.

We are concerned here with the spiritual ascent alone; it does not always coincide, far from it, with material advance. Thus, during the four hundred years spent in the Wadi Tumilat (9) the conditions of life obviously improved, but the idea of a mission grew weak. On the other hand, during the 'forty years' spent in the desert (10–11) with Moses, an opposite effect can be observed; the harsh material existence led gradually to a revival of the sense of vocation among the Hebrews.

It should be noted that in ancient history before 600 B.C. dates cannot be determined with any accuracy. They are given here merely as an indication.

### **ABRAHAM: (1850–1780?), son of Terah.**

1. About 1850, Abraham leaves Ur, in company with the clan of his father Terah.
2. About 1830, at Haran, the revelation to Abraham of the one, holy, invisible God.

### **ISAAC: (c. 1780–1700?), son of Abraham.**

3. His life is not marked by any striking event.

### **JACOB: (c. 1700?–1620?), son of Isaac.**

4. The troubles that marked the patriarch's early days.
5. The crossing of the Jabbok.
6. Jacob understands his mission.

### **JOSEPH: (1700?–1620?), son of Jacob.**

7. Joseph arrives in the Egyptian Delta, occupied at that period by the Hyksos and their Asiatic collaborators.
8. Jacob and his sons come down to the Delta.
9. For about four centuries the Israelites remain in the Delta area.

### **MOSES:**

10. About 1225, the Exodus or departure from Egypt in the reign of the pharaoh Menephtah. The crossing of the Red Sea. Sojourn for about a year near Sinai. Kadesh.  
Death of Moses on Mount Nebo (c. 1200).

### **JOSHUA:**

11. About 1200 the Hebrews cross the Jordan in the neighbourhood of Jericho.
12. From 1200 to 1175, the tribes of Israel settle in Canaan.

### **PERIOD OF THE JUDGES:**

13. 1175–1040, the Judges.
14. 1040–1030, Samuel.

### **THE KINGSHIP:**

15. 1030–1010, Saul.
16. 1010–970, David.
17. 970–931, Solomon.

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## MOSES MAKES HIS APPEARANCE IN THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

It was in the Nile Delta about 1260 B.C. during the reign of the renowned and formidable Pharaoh Rameses II of the XIXth dynasty, that one of his daughters, with her companions, went down as usual to bathe in an offshoot of the river. There, among the reed beds she noticed a basket made of papyrus and coated with pitch and bitumen. The little vessel was quickly seized and opened. Inside they found a tiny child, barely three months old. He was crying. 'It is a Hebrew child,' the princess exclaimed with pity. And she at once made up her mind to save him.

How are we to explain the fact that in the middle of the twelfth century B.C. a 'bene-Israel'<sup>1</sup> could have been

<sup>1</sup>Semite, Aramean, Israelite (or *bene-Israel*, a descendant of Jacob called *Israel*), Jew: all these terms are used by the Bible writers and by modern historians. It may be useful to give a summary explanation of them:

**Semite:** Abraham and his clan belong to the great family of Semites; their waves of invasion (originating probably in Arabia) bore down successively on Palestine and on the great Mesopotamian valley.

**Aramean:** Abraham and his descendants thought of themselves as Arameans – a Semitic sub-group. A typical example: after the Twelve Tribes had been established in Canaan, every Israelite peasant was obliged to come in the spring to offer the first-fruits of his land at the altar of Yahweh. He used a ritual formula that began: 'My father (it is Abraham, of course, who is meant) was an Aramean nomad . . .'. In this way the disciple of Yahweh affirmed his solidarity with an homogeneous group of pastoral tribes scattered throughout the Fertile Crescent.

found in so dramatic a situation, far from Canaan (the present-day Palestine) and so sadly abandoned in a channel of the Nile?

### The sons of Jacob-Israel in Egypt from the arrival of Joseph (c. 1650) to the birth of Moses (c. 1260)

Some four hundred years before the curious episode just recounted, the tribes of the bene-Israel had settled in a remote sector of the kingdom of Egypt. It began with Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob and Rachel. He had unwittingly aroused the hatred of his ten brothers, who, taking advantage of an encounter with some Midianite merchants on their way to the Nile Delta, decided to sell Joseph as a slave. He thus found himself unexpectedly transplanted into Egypt.

At this period the Delta was militarily occupied by the Hyksos.<sup>2</sup> In this new social situation, Canaanites were comparatively numerous, at least in the key positions. Joseph discovered that he was among members of his own race. Helped by an active mind and favourable circumstances, it was not long before he had scaled the ladder of the administrative hierarchy. A chapter in Genesis (41: 37–45) relates with obvious relish the extraordinary success of this Hebrew slave, a slave, but very sharp witted. The time came when he was given the

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**Israelites** (or also *bene-Israel*, that is, sons of Israel): This word designates the twelve sons of Jacob (who was called Israel, that is 'God is mighty', after the famous crossing of the Jabbok) who are the eponymous ancestors of the Twelve Tribes.

**Jews** (in Hebrew: *Yehudi*): Etymology: Judah, the fourth son of Jacob and Leah. It is a word that only came into use in the time of Jeremiah (645–587); it then came to designate the people of south Palestine; at that period the word 'Israelite' came to mean strictly the inhabitants of the ancient kingdom of the north.

These circumstances explain why the scribes, the editors of the Bible, use one or other of these names, according to the ethnological, political or religious point of view which they have to adopt in the course of their narrative.

<sup>2</sup> The Hyksos, whose racial origin is still disputed, seem to have been Indo-Europeans coming from the great Asiatic steppe, north of India.

## Moses makes his Appearance

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full confidence of a Hyksos leader, the master of the Delta, and he became the monarch's vizier (prime minister).

As a good brother, a good son, and a proper Semite, he was quick to summon his whole family to this wealthy foreign land over which he ruled as a high official. Hitherto they had remained on the parched steppe of Hebron. Now, in Biblical language this Hebrew tribe came down 'into Egypt'. As a result of recent archaeological discoveries we can say with a little more geographical precision that the bene-Israel then came to settle in the Wadi Tumilat, in the land of Goshen (or Gessen), a territory east of the Delta. They continued to be raisers of livestock, that is, sheep and goats, and continued as nomads in this frontier region bordering the wilderness of Shur (or Etham). In addition, taking advantage of the irrigation afforded by the sluices of the Nile, they engaged in small-scale agricultural and horticultural activities.

Suddenly the position changed. In about 1580, a movement of national liberation that originated in the south, confronted the invaders, and soon, after fierce campaigns, succeeded in driving the unwanted Hyksos out of the country.

Meanwhile, in the borderland of Goshen, the Hebrew tribe of Jacob's descendants had not moved. They saw no reason to follow their protectors in their retreat to Canaan. As in the days of the Hyksos' occupation, the Israelite shepherds carried on their undistinguished, quiet and peaceful pastoral life in the area east of the Delta. Naturally they took care not to attract excessive Egyptian attention. On its part, Pharaoh's government seems to have accepted without undue reluctance the presence of these bearded Semites in a border region, of no great interest, at least to the cultivators of the Nile valley, accustomed to better crops than could be grown there.



So Joseph went and told Pharaoh, 'My father and brothers, along with their flocks and cattle and all their possessions, have come from the land of Canaan and are in the land of Goshen' . . .  
'. . . the land of Canaan is hard-pressed by famine. Now give your servants leave to stay in the land of Goshen.' Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'They may stay in the land of Goshen . . .'

Gen. 47: 1, 6

## Moses makes his Appearance

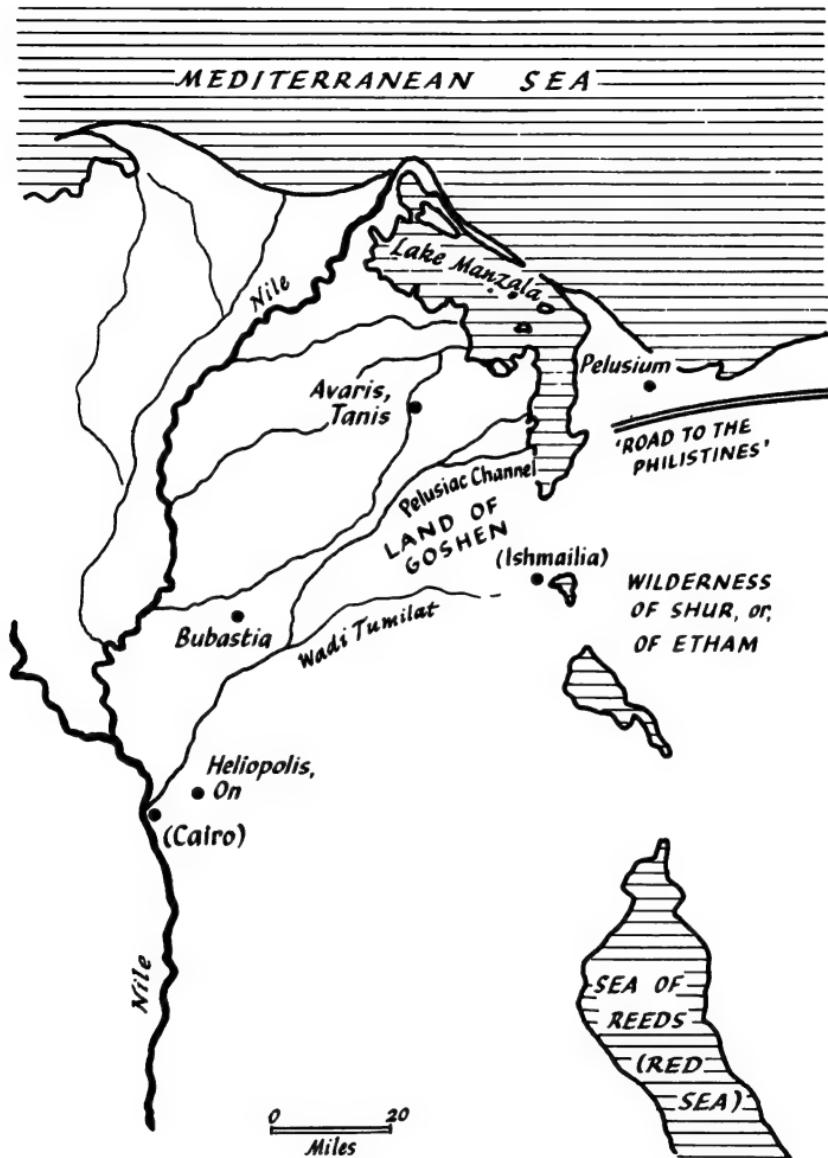
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It was a *modus vivendi* like many another, and ultimately matters seemed to be working out for the best.

And yet a historian may be allowed to record a certain disquiet about the further development of the religion of the one and only God, unexpectedly revealed, some centuries beforehand, to an obscure nomadic shepherd named Abraham. The pomp and glittering display of the numerous and differing Egyptian cults too often proved an allurement to the Hebrews.

Abraham's fidelity and that of his descendants, shepherds in territories that were partly a wilderness, can be explained, at least to some extent, by the almost continued isolation of the clan. It had few relationships with the other nomadic groups, wandering in search of pasture hither and thither across the steppe, and practising polytheism. As a rule it kept clear of the Canaanite cities in which immoral cults proliferated. Thus the patriarchs of the wilderness — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — were able, as far as possible, and at the cost of much praiseworthy effort, to preserve the religion of their clan. They managed to retain without compromise, the idea of the one, holy God. It is unnecessary to repeat that, at that date, this was a metaphysical conception of profound originality.

In the eastern Delta area, however, where the clan of the bene-Israel had been encamped for nearly four hundred years (1650–1250), the religious situation acquired an entirely new aspect. In the very centre of the land of Goshen where the Hebrews led their nomadic life, Egyptian fortresses had been erected, after the expulsion of the Hyksos, to stem the advance of the Hittites, the new opponents of the pharaoh's power. Arsenals appeared, military stores and even cities — Pithom, for example — in the very heart of the former pastures. In these places the central government set up bastions, administrative



MAP OF THE EASTERN DELTA OF THE NILE

## Moses makes his Appearance

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centres, and huge temples with magnificent portals. Excavations have uncovered these sanctuaries dedicated to the gods of the Nile valley. The Hebrews, therefore, were in a position, from time to time, to gaze in wonder at the sumptuous processions, led by colleges of priests, brilliantly vested, and accompanied by musicians, singers and acolytes. To this was added the spell-binding poetry of a rich pantheon calculated to strike the imagination — gods with animal heads, animals with the head of a man or woman and a complicated mythology of the dramatic domestic affairs of these gods.

Which then would take control of the soul of Jacob's sons? Would it be Yahweh, their invisible God, or Osiris, the Egyptian god with a hundred faces?

In the end Israel came out of the conflict victorious, but its spiritual triumph was costly. The price was such grievous suffering that its terrifying memory was never effaced from its annals. The hospitable territory of the Delta became in the words of the scribe: 'the House of slavery'. Less rhetorically, we may express it as the imprisonment, the frightful slavery, persecution even to death, which soon emerged as a policy of extermination — the prologue of Auschwitz. A word, or rather a name, Rameses II, explains it all.

### **Rameses II: pharaoh of genius and fanatical builder**

The Bible records a number of typical details about the persecution. The victims were Abraham's descendants; their executioner was an Egyptian monarch. The biblical writer, in this case, speaks simply of 'Pharaoh' with a capital letter, and gives no other indication of the ruler's name.

Modern scholarship has tried to ascertain exactly which of the pharaohs was reigning when these events occurred. Today, after much hesitation and discussion

among specialists, it is possible to determine the period. This sombre page of history was written in the reign of Rameses II. The conclusions of modern archaeologists who have carried out lengthy and minute excavations in that part of the land of Goshen which borders on the Wadi Tumilat have made this quite certain.

Rameses II reigned for sixty-seven years (1290–1224). This pharaoh whose mummy can be seen in the Cairo museum died at eighty-three, crowned with glory and honour. There, in his sarcophagus, we see him as he was in his last years; a wrinkled man of great age; bald, apart from a few white hairs on the nape of the neck and temples; bushy eyebrows; a finely proportioned aquiline nose; high cheek-bones; and a protruding upper lip. Radiologists have ascertained by x-rays that his teeth are in perfect condition. Even in death and lying within his coffin, his expression remains proud, majestic and imposing.

Historians consider that he was a military and diplomatic genius of the first rank. In addition, this tireless builder was an architect with a mania, and it was this that explains the fact that he plunged Israel into an agony of despair. It was his building craze that stimulated the spiritual awakening of Israel, the vocation of Moses, the Exodus and the return of the Hebrews to Canaan, the Promised Land.

In winter, Rameses resided at Thebes on the upper Nile. There, he began by enlarging considerably the temple of Karnak. Then he started the enormous construction known today as the Ramesseum. The most extraordinary temple of his reign is certainly that of Abu Simbel in upper Nubia with its façade nearly ninety feet wide, cut out of the rock-face itself. But his favourite residence seems to have been the Delta, where the nineteenth dynasty originated.

## Moses makes his Appearance

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Along the frontier of the land of Goshen he ordered the erection – or the restoration – of a series of fortresses, a kind of Maginot line, intended to hold back a possible Asiatic attack, this time from the Hittites. On the ruins of the former capital of the Hyksos (the city was called the Hat-Varit; the Greeks later changed the name to Avaris), Rameses constructed the northern capital of his empire, and inevitably he bestowed his own name upon it, adding boastful epithets: Pi-Rameses aa nekthu – the House of Rameses, great through victory. The Bible calls the city more simply *Rameses* (Exod. 1: 11).

In this same region of the Delta, and more precisely in the centre of the Wadi Tumilat, Rameses laid the foundations of Per-Aton (the House of Aton), in honour of Aton, the sun god of Heliopolis. The Bible calls this city *Pithom* (Exod. 1: 11).

Thus the Israelite encampments were steadily surrounded by military establishments as a result of the activities of Rameses II. Four centuries before these events (c. 1600) the first Hebrew shepherds (called: 'Joseph's brethren') had set up their tents in this corner of the Delta; it was then an isolated place and they had scarcely any contact with the natives of the Nile valley. But in the time of Rameses they found themselves in the immediate neighbourhood of the newly-built Egyptian cities; they met the soldiers of the frontier garrisons almost daily; and they lived close to the magnificent sanctuaries raised to the glory of the countless Egyptian gods. From this unforeseen situation sprang the drama of Israel's enslavement and threatened destruction through the imposition of forced labour.

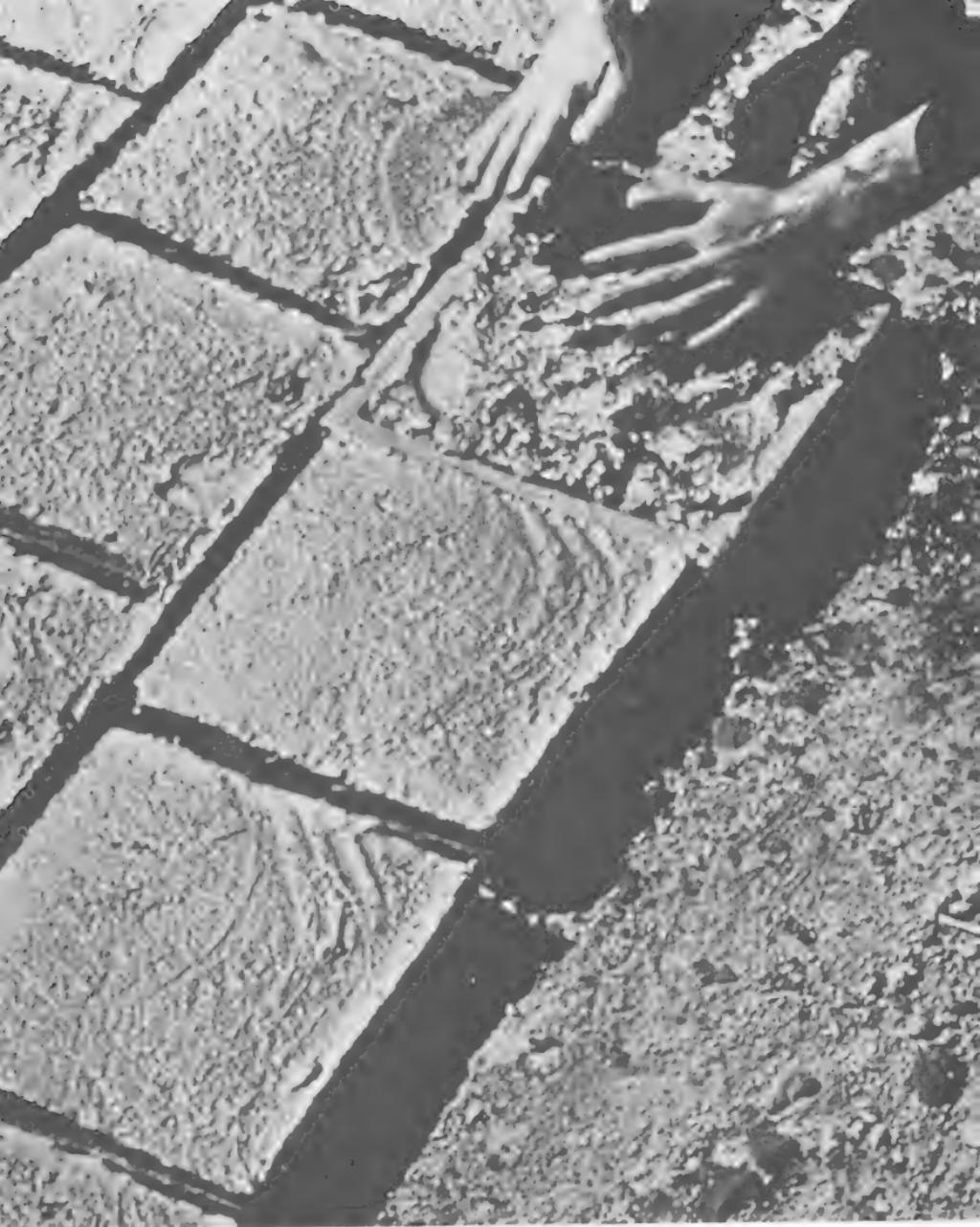
### Forced labour in the East, and particularly in Egypt

Throughout the ancient East, civilian workers were summoned for a period (and of course without pay) to

carry out State projects that today would be called public works.

We are particularly well informed about this institution in Egypt, because in the tombs of the Nile valley many wall paintings record, in striking detail, the methods of work of the teams employed in building the palaces, temples, royal cities, the pyramids and the mastabas. The artist depicts long lines of peasants, usually impressed for a period of three months, working on some project. We see them on their way to the river to collect sand and clay which had to be carried in baskets to the building site. The mixture of earth, water and chopped straw was then trodden under foot, and the resulting crude mixture was poured into wooden moulds and exposed side by side, in huge squares, to the fierce sun. This was done in order to obtain what was called the 'raw brick'. Then followed the removal from the moulds, an even more taxing operation. Lastly the materials had to be taken to the top of scaffolding at a dizzy height where the masons worked in gangs. There was also work at the ovens; here the bricks were baked over a wood fire; the men worked in the stifling heat of the furnace. Other and equally painful scenes are depicted on these walls: teams of men harnessed together like beasts of burden, dragging enormous blocks of stone on wooden rollers, or colossal statues for the palaces or temples in process of erection. These journeys sometimes extended to many miles; for these blocks, ready shaped or carved, came in barges from distant quarries in the south along the waterways of the Nile and its canals.

Most of the pharaohs were eager to raise buildings meant to perpetuate their name and to proclaim their glory; the architects were obliged to observe the strict timetable given to them, so that the work had to be done very rapidly indeed. The death-rate in these groups of



Accordingly they put slave-drivers over the Israelites to wear them down under heavy loads. In this way they built the store-cities of Pitho, and Rameses . . . The Egyptians forced the sons of Israel into slavery, and made their lives unbearable with hard labour, work with clay and with brick . . .

Exod. 1: 11-14

workers must therefore have been high. They were confined in a narrow space, without hygiene, underfed, and compelled to pursue their task without stopping, while the pitiless sun beat down.

### Egyptian forced labour and the Bible

The bene-Israel of the Delta area had, in their turn, to accept this terrible exaction, but they do not seem to have understood the real reasons for it. The masters of the Egyptian projects had to solve a labour problem in the traditional way. But the Bible gives a racial explanation for the forced labour of the Semitic shepherds: it considers that the labour to which Abraham's descendants were subjected was a methodical persecution, directed specifically against the worshippers of Yahweh, as an attempt at systematic destruction.

In the beginning of Exodus we read that the Pharaoh said to his people: '*Look, these people the sons of Israel, have become so numerous and strong that they are a threat to us. We must be prudent and take steps against their increasing any further, or if war should break out, they might add to the number of our enemies. They might take arms against us.*' Accordingly they put slave-drivers over the Israelites to wear them down under heavy loads. In this way they built the store-cities of Pithom and Rameses. In the end, realizing that the vital strength of Israel was not to be destroyed, the Egyptian monarch gave the order: '*Throw all the boys born to the Hebrews into the River (the Nile), but let all the girls live*' (Exod. 1: 9-22).

We have reached the time when the incursions of the Peoples of the Sea began; it was then that these formidable pirates started their attacks on the Delta. With a semblance of justification, the Pharaohs may have feared that the Israelites in the land of Goshen might

one day make common cause with the invaders. They may, in fact, have thought that the sons of Jacob might constitute a fifth column.

In addition, the Hebrews had, like all nomadic shepherds, a proud and tempestuous character. These men who lived in tents only recognized as their leader the patriarch of their clan. With them freedom stood first, and for thousands of year it had been their custom to strike camp when they so decided and set it up again where they chose.

The time came, however, when the Hebrews found themselves numbered like cattle at the hands of Egyptian scribes. At dawn the foremen of the works, armed with whips, arrived at the tents to obtain delivery of the men to be taken to the construction yards. There they were set to work; some to put the 'baked bricks' into moulds; others, the sturdier ones, had to take their places in the human team that dragged the blocks of stone or the statues. Shouts of command punctuated the journey and the stick was generously applied.

Israel, the nomad of the steppe, could not accept this treatment. For them, in the words of the writer of this part of Exodus, Egypt became 'the House of Slavery'. Murmurs of revolt were heard among the sons of Jacob who, being Asiatics, had in any case scant sympathy for the people of the Nile valley. The Egyptians, for their part, had always called these foreigners from the east, 'the plague' or 'the leprosy' of Asia. If the Hebrews objected to forced labour then they must be treated with even greater severity. Each side became resolute and hardened in its point of view. Each provoked the other. But the combat was unequal.

Repression soon became merciless. In some parts and for a period, the guardians of public order may have indulged in systematic destruction of the newly-born, to

decrease the numbers of these foreigners who might possibly assist the People of the Sea in one of their attacks.

Israel did not yield an inch. At night, in the tents, the elders came to comfort the unfortunate; they spoke of Yahweh, the God of Abraham; they narrated the epic of the patriarchs; they constantly reminded them that the present trial would end; Joseph had prophesied that the tribe would return to Canaan: '*I am about to die,*' the former vizier of the Hyksos kings had said, '*but God will be sure to remember you kindly and take you back from this country to the land that he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*' (Gen. 50: 24). But though they waited, prayed and hoped, years passed and their situation grew daily worse.

Suddenly, in these circumstances, Jochebed, the wife of Amram of the clan of Kehat (a subdivision of the tribe of Levi) gave birth to a son, who was later to be called Moses. He seemed to be just another Hebrew: in reality he was one of the most outstanding personalities of the Old Testament, and he provided the main link between Abraham of Hebron and Jesus of Nazareth.

## THE EARLY HIDDEN LIFE OF MOSES

It must be admitted that the biblical traditions on the youth of Moses can be misleading, and the Egyptian documents of the period (at least those that have been discovered up to the present) do not even mention his name. Thus at first sight the historian's position seems to be extremely difficult.

Fortunately, however, in the last quarter of a century, excavators, epigraphists and orientalists, have considerably enlarged the scope of our knowledge of the first period that Moses spent on the banks of the Nile, and we are beginning to acquire ample information about the social, political and religious environment in which Israel's future lawgiver was brought up. The indications suggest that we must correct some of the details in the biblical narrative. On the other hand, it may be said that out of this confrontation with the archaeological data, the story at the beginning of Exodus emerges with remarkably new life and is authenticated at least in the basic elements of its composition.

This arrival of a Hebrew child in a papyrus cradle floating in one of the canals issuing from the Nile has troubled some biblical historians; what are their objec-

tions, or rather, their critical observations? The first concerns Moses' basket. The second bears upon his name, and here also some unexpected conclusions will be found.

### 'A papyrus basket, coated with bitumen and pitch' (Exod. 2: 3)

A basket made of papyrus, says the text; and this is quite reasonable. The papyrus belongs to the natural flora of the Delta; from the stems of this plant the Egyptian peasants constructed light boats which carried them between the little islands during the months of the annual flooding of the Nile Delta (July to October).

The cradle, adds the text, was coated with pitch and with bitumen, a material that did not originate in Egypt, but may have been imported from the banks of the Dead Sea, which in fact was given the name of the Lake of Asphalt by the ancients. So far, all the essential elements of the narrative seem to be perfectly acceptable. But orientalists point out that this story of a child, exposed, abandoned and later rescued, formed an integral part of the age-old oriental folklore until it later came to be adopted by the epic cycles of the West.

Long before Moses there are many examples of these new-born, abandoned infants, seemingly destined to die, and saved in an unforeseen manner. In the mythology of the Nile valley a son of Nephtys is taken by the goddess Isis under her protection. In the mythology of the Mesopotamian valley there is Gilgamesh, the Sumerian king of Uruk. In Greek mythology, Perseus the son of Zeus, who cuts off the Medusa's head, and there is Bacchus, another son of Zeus. With a little more historical foundation, we find Sargon I, himself also 'exposed' on a river (the Euphrates), and unexpectedly picked up.

After Moses this moving legend continued to be used

to adorn the earliest moments of various eminent persons. Romulus, for example, the founder of Rome (who traditionally flourished from 753 to 715 B.C.) was believed to have been 'exposed to the beasts', but on a mountain, and he owed his safety to a wolf who gave him her milk. Similar stories are told of the conqueror Cyrus II (surnamed 'the Great') 560–529 B.C., the creator of the Persian Empire; of the pharaoh Ptolemy I, nearer to our own epoch (305–285 B.C.), the founder of the Lagides dynasty in Egypt. And we must not forget Siegfried, the hero of the *Niebelungen*.

To return to Sargon I (the Elder), a Semite and the founder of the powerful Akkadian dynasty: he lived in about 2350 B.C. and therefore more than a thousand years *before* Moses. A brick found in Babylon gives this account of his origins: 'I am Syarru-Kin (legitimate king), a strong king, the monarch of Agadu. My mother was a priestess:<sup>1</sup> I did not know my father. My city was Azupirannu, on the bank of the Euphrates. My mother bore me in a hiding place; she put me in a basket of reeds and she closed its entrance with bitumen. She left me on the River (the Euphrates), and it did not drown me. The River brought me to Akki, the water-drawer.<sup>2</sup> Akki took me in the kindness of his heart. Akki, the water-drawer, brought me up as his own child. Akki, the water-drawer, made me a gardener. Ishtar (one of the most powerful goddesses of the Mesopotamian pantheon) loved me. . . .'

This enlightening evidence continues. At the end of the last century (in 1887, to be precise) an archaeological

<sup>1</sup> In Babylonian, *evitu*, the wife of a god. Some orientalists translate the word as 'vestal', that is, a priestess who has taken a vow of virginity. It is a detail that fits the context perfectly.

<sup>2</sup> A drawer of water. In Sumeria and in Egypt an agricultural labourer responsible for the exhausting work at the *shadoof*, a machine for raising the river water so that it could be distributed along irrigation channels to the fields. In the East this occupation was regarded as the lowest rung in the social ladder.

mission brought to light the capital of the famous 'schismatic pharaoh', Amenophis IV (1370–1353), who, in order to highlight his religious reformation (the worship of the sun's disk: Aton) had taken the name Akenaton (the splendour of Aton) and had called his new city Aketaton (the horizon of the solar disk). Archaeologists have given this city the name of the tiny Arab village perched on its ruins: Tel el-Amarna. In one of the rooms of Akenaton's palace, the explorers had the good fortune to discover a great many clay tablets, the famous library of el-Amarna. One of these contained a fresh version of a part of the story of the Akkadian king Sargon: his birth, his abandonment in 'a reed basket coated with bitumen', the saving of the child by Akki, the drawer of water, and so on. Obviously this legendary story, two examples of which, at the opposite ends of the Fertile Crescent, have been identified by orientalists, forms an essential element in the folklore of the Middle East. This touching short story of Sargon's floating cradle must have been a commonplace in Hebrew popular circles; and therefore it is not in any way surprising to find it repeated, adopted and incorporated in the biography of another Semite, called Moses.

### **Moses, an Egyptian word meaning 'boy'**

With characteristic eastern astuteness, Miriam, an elder sister of the abandoned child (abandoned in theory, but not in practice) had taken up her post some distance from the bank in order to see what happened. She noticed the stirring of compassion in the young Egyptian women, and came forward to suggest to the princess that she might be allowed to find a nurse who could give her breasts to the infant whose cries proclaimed its hunger. When she was told she might, she hurried off to find the child's own mother.

## The Early Hidden Life of Moses

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Biblical tradition took care to preserve the name of this woman who brought forth Israel's saviour: she was called Jochebed (Exod. 6: 20). This is a word formed from the root Yo (Yahweh) and which can be translated 'Yo (Yahweh) is important'. The names Yinatan, Yoahaz, etc., belong to the same type: they are in honour of Yahweh's existence and his protective power. (He was known by this name, at least in certain circles, even before the great revelation on Sinai. This point is referred to again at the proper time.)

Moses' father's name was Amram, a son of Qehat and therefore a descendant of Levi. He married a woman of the same tribe (Exod. 2: 1): Jochebed, his aunt, his father's sister (Numbers 26: 58–60). This action is in complete harmony with the traditional customs of the nomad shepherds: it was best to marry within one's clan, or at least one's tribe, and, in difficult circumstances, with close relations to whom there was connection by ties of cousinship. Some typical examples of such blood-relationships were noted earlier in the cases of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Amram and Jochebed had three known children: Aaron the eldest; a daughter, Miriam; and Moses, the youngest.

Moses' mother came therefore to the daughter of Rameses II who said to her: '*Take this child away and suckle it for me. I will see you are paid*' (Exod. 2: 7–9).<sup>3</sup> The die was cast. Moses was now under the protection of a

<sup>3</sup> Modern historians have been eager to discover the exact name of this princess. But, Rameses II, whose harem was well furnished, had about a hundred male descendants. As for his daughters, that somewhat negligible family element in the East, the palace scribes did not bother to count them, although their number might probably be put at another hundred, if not more. This would considerably diminish the value of the recommendation and protection from which Moses might benefit at Pharaoh's court. The princess, the heroine of this story, is called by the historian Josephus, Termuthis, that is, nurse. (*De Vita Moysis*, 1, IX, 5.) Eusebius calls her Meoris. The early rabbis gave her the name of Bithiah (1 Chron. 4: 78).

member of the court, a minimal but not negligible protection. He was allowed a pension from State funds and the government guaranteed his safety. In addition, his earliest education was entrusted to his own mother, and thus, providentially, he was taught the principles of the religion of his ancestors. A better solution can hardly be imagined to the problems besetting this young Hebrew who was born at a time of the gravest persecution. *When the child grew up (his mother) brought him to Pharaoh's daughter who treated him like a son; she named him Moses because, she said, 'I drew him out of the water'* (Exod. 2: 10).

The Hebrew word for Moses is Mosheh. Jewish popular etymology connected the name of its national hero with the verb *mashah* (to draw out, extract), or, more specifically, from its active participle *mosheh* (the one who draws), and by extension, the one who draws his people from exile. But, grammatically, 'the one who was drawn out of the water' would demand a passive, not an active form. We need not pursue this inquiry further; it is no longer accepted today. The interpretation of Philo and Josephus must also be rejected. This was based on Coptic expressions which call water *mo*, and *ousha*, he who has been saved from drowning. Orientalists now seem to agree that the word Moses is a phonetic transposition of the Egyptian word *mosu*, *mosis*, meaning son, or boy. This is clear in the titles of some of the Egyptian dynasties, for example *Thutmosis* (son of Thut); *Amosis*, *Rameses*, etc. (cf. in English, *Johnson*, *Richardson*, etc.).

So, Moses, the great lawgiver of Israel, the saviour and leader of the chosen people bore as his name one common in Egypt (the land hated by the Hebrews). It may be properly observed at this point that in the Old Testament no one else is called Moses. Nor was he alone in a

## The Early Hidden Life of Moses

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philological confusion of this kind. The name of Phineas, one of the heroes of the Exodus, means, in Egyptian, a Nubian, a southern black African. And other biblical names of the same period are likewise Egyptian: Hur, Hopni, and perhaps even Aaron, Moses' brother.

### Moses' hidden years

*So the woman took the child and suckled it.* Miriam's trick had succeeded. *When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who treated him like a son* (Exod. 2: 9, 10). Does this mean that we may expect some details of the education that Moses would have received at court? Archaeology has shown that in Egyptian official and court circles education was well advanced. But the biblical writer refrains from providing us with the slightest information on this point. His silence is complete and doubtless intentional and understandable. For in Israel, Moses' long and profitable stay in Egyptian intellectual circles – so wholeheartedly and continuously loathed by the Hebrews – was never mentioned in detail.

'Pharaoh's daughter treated him like a son' is the brief summary (all too brief for our interest) given in the Bible. And it passes at once to another subject: *Moses, a man by now, set out to visit his countrymen* (Exod. 2: 11). This abrupt transition is subtle; the curriculum which he may (indeed must) have pursued in the educational institutions is thereby relegated to obscurity.

In the ancient world several writers tried to remedy the silence of the Old Testament on the subject of the years of Moses' intellectual formation. For instance, Manetho, the keeper of the Egyptian archives (third century B.C.) states that Moses was a priest of Heliopolis, with a revolutionary turn of mind, and the apostle of a new theology. This is hard to accept, for it is in complete

contradiction with the essential spirit of the Exodus itself. It is difficult to see in this man of burning faith in Yahweh, in this ardent soul who spoke 'to the Lord face to face', a convert, a former polytheist. In any case, Manetho is careful to add that his explanation was only something 'that had been reported'.

According to the Jew Philo (*De Vita Moysis*, 6, 606), a Platonist of Alexandria and a contemporary of Christ, Moses had, under the direction of Egyptian priests, studied the occult sciences concealed beneath the hieroglyphics. These same religious circles also revealed to him the great mysteries of initiation, gathered from the ancient lands of Mesopotamia, secretly preserved in the temples, and passed on under certain conditions to those adepts worthy to receive them and able to understand them. Needless to say, none of this rests upon a historical foundation. Philo was simply trying to prove — though without a single document to support his argument — that Moses, like himself, was a philosopher and an occultist.

Clement of Alexandria and Josephus, in their turn, supply a highly coloured, but somewhat fanciful portrait of Moses. Thanks to the princess' protection he became, they say, general of the Egyptian armies and advanced against the Ethiopian forces. Naturally he crushed this formidable army. He also knew how to protect his troops from being bitten by the serpents that abound in the desert. Inevitably in such circumstances, the daughter of the conquered king fell in love with the hero. Moses married her and returned to Egypt in triumph. It is all very like a romantic novel.

Too much should not be expected from the New Testament in the way of more detailed information. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in his speech to the Sanhedrin, declared that *Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians* (*Acts 7: 22*). It is a large claim, but his

## The Early Hidden Life of Moses

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subsequent career in the desert shows that he must, in fact, have possessed considerable literary and scientific knowledge. How was he taught and by whom? No information is provided on these points. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (11: 24–26), is content to refer to Moses' renunciation of the enchantments of Egypt, 'the pleasures of sin'.

This tantalizing question of Moses' hidden early years looked as though it would remain unsolved. Quite recently, however, Fr Cazelles, a professor in the Institut Catholique in Paris, has put forward an explanation which seems at last to provide the key to the problem. He suggests that the young Moses was a Hebrew of the Delta area who had been enlisted, in the traditional way, in a school for 'scribes'.

In parenthesis, we may take a brief look at the position held by these scribes in the internal economy of the Egyptian State, which was the prey of a fearful bureaucracy. The complicated machinery of officialdom existed everywhere. Officials (called scribes, for usually they were the only people who could write) were to be found in each locality. Their work was to attend to the royal commands, transmit them and see that they were carried out. Some had to work out the basic facts and figures for the architects; others were responsible for information about the army and the quantity of war material; and still others drew up official documents and balance sheets. Scribes were everywhere, in government circles, in the most important civil and military organizations and in more obscure positions. These specialists<sup>4</sup> needed training to equip them for the various tasks that normally required serious technical knowledge. For this purpose

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the Babylonian captivity (586–538) the learned scribes provided an explanation of the sacred books already committed to writing at the period. Thus they became doctors of the law.

schools were set up near the temples; centres of instruction run by priests who, in the Nile valley, as elsewhere in the East, held the monopoly of scientific and literary teaching.

We have ample information about the educational methods used in these centres. Daily life was harsh; there was frequent corporal punishment, and the whip was regarded as the necessary complement to sound instruction. 'The ears of a pupil are at the bottom of his back,' says a teachers' guide, with evident relish, 'he listens when he is beaten.' And a scribe who had completed his course thanks his former masters for the care they had bestowed on him when he was still on the school benches: 'You beat my behind, and as a result your teaching entered my head!'

Some interesting details of scholastic life have been recorded on papyri. At dawn, the boy left home, taking a basket containing bread and a flask of beer. On reaching school he took his place on a bench. Beginners wrote their lessons on a slate which could be erased or corrected as necessary. Later on, the best pupils were allowed to write on papyrus rolls. The curriculum is well known; mathematics and traditional texts formed the groundwork; then came law, history, geography and various technical matters. A good scribe had to have some ability as a draughtsman, because the hieroglyphs were made up of all kinds of pictorial signs and figures.

At first sight it may seem surprising that Moses should have become a member of one of these schools essentially intended for the sons of officials or of highly placed persons. In fact, however, he may have belonged to a very special class of scribe. The truth of this statement is shown by the discovery at el-Amarna of some diplomatic notes written in Akkadian with cuneiform characters and sent by the Canaanite princelings to the pharaohs whose

## The Early Hidden Life of Moses

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vassals they were at that time. It is true that these documents, dating from c. 1400, were written two centuries before the time of Moses. But even in the days of Rameses II, Moses' contemporary, the court kept up a close relationship with these petty sovereigns who formed a buffer between Egypt and the ever-present menace of the Hittite power. There continued to be an active correspondence between the pharaohs and the Palestinian rulers. Diplomatic exchanges were written in Akkadian, the international language, so both in Egypt and Canaan there had to be secretaries who could translate it into the native language.

A team of scribes, therefore, who could perform this delicate task, worked by pharaoh's side. We also know that the Egyptians, with only a mediocre gift of tongues, preferred to employ multilingual Asiatics who, in order to explain a difficult Akkadian word to their colleagues, found little trouble in putting a Canaanite equivalent in the margin. Both could understand this perfectly, since it was their ordinary language. In Egypt, these official translators, usually of foreign origin, were allowed to retain their national religion and traditions. The Egyptians disliked foreigners intensely, and we can guess the repugnance with which they made use of the services of these aliens.

Moses, the Asiatic, we may well believe, was early recognized as a promising future scribe-translator, and was consequently educated in one of the temple schools—a somewhat special school, however, containing pupils of Canaanite race and language, but not native Egyptians. This is the probable origin of Manetho's mistake when he called Moses 'a former priest of Heliopolis', and it explains Stephen's statement to the Sanhedrin that Moses had acquired all the wisdom of the Egyptians.

### Anger and murder

*Moses, a man by now, set out at this time to visit his countrymen, and he saw what a hard life they were having* (Exod. 2: 11).

If we accept Fr Cazelles' explanation of the administrative functions that the scribe Moses may have performed, then the way things happened becomes perfectly clear. After a number of years spent, since his earliest days, in some special service of a great city — Heliopolis on Manetho's suggestion, or perhaps Thebes, the southern capital of the dynasty of Rameses — Moses made a pilgrimage to visit his countrymen in the Delta area. He cannot, of course, have failed to have heard of the Israelites' enslavement in Goshen while he was still far from them in Egypt. And wherever his official residence was, he would have been in a position to observe the cruel conditions to which the Egyptians were subjected, for it was a time when the Nile valley had been transformed into what may be called an immense building site. Even so, when he actually saw the descendants of Jacob toiling under the whip, compelled to work under inhuman conditions, and plunged morally and physically into an abyss of despair, it produced a moment of fearful anguish in his soul. It might even be that he felt a kind of remorse for having in no way shared the pain of his brethren in religion.

One day he witnessed a scene, common enough, but to which he had not yet grown accustomed. *He saw an Egyptian strike a Hebrew, one of his countrymen. Looking round he could see no one in sight, so he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand* (Exod. 2: 11–12). The following day he felt bound to intervene when he came across two Israelites quarrelling; he tried to reason with them, *What do you mean by hitting your fellow countryman?* he asked one of them. The man replied

## The Early Hidden Life of Moses

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sharply: '*And who appointed you to be prince over us, and judge? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?*' There could be no further doubt; the man whom he had rescued from the foreman's stick the day before had spoken without thought, and now the whole clan knew of the killing. Moses had been denounced by one of his co-religionists, anxious to curry favour with the authorities, and he was warned that the Egyptian police were on his track. If he was caught, his account would be quickly settled.

He decided to flee without further delay. But where could he go? He made up his mind to leave Egyptian territory and seek shelter in Midian, one of the Semitic clans related to Abraham through his concubine Keturah.

### **The compelling psychological motive for Moses' stay in Midian**

Exegetes do not seem to have stressed or explained the compelling motive for Moses' stay in the tents of Midian among the nomads of the steppe. What in fact was Moses' position at the time of the murder? He was a scribe, a scholar, a kind of technician. Since his early years he had probably been confined, first in an Egyptian temple school, and then in the office of a chancellory where he spent his days translating diplomatic notes, editing Akkadian texts with Canaanite explanations, and classifying tablets or papyri with hieroglyphic reference numbers in the margin. Some of these documents still exist and give a good idea of this delicate and very specialized work.

Moses was still a bachelor, who did not marry until much later; and so at that time he had no family. His sole companions were a few members of his own race, solitaries like himself. He was out of touch with the difficulties of daily life, and cut off from contact with ordinary people.

Thus he was far from being prepared for the imposing and onerous mission that lay ahead. But in Midian where he went he was in a pastoral society in which men are not always easily led. His destiny was to be Israel's leader and yet he was entirely lacking in social experience. He was introduced to it and began on it in the setting of a nomad encampment which offered human problems enough. A new life was beginning for him that was to fashion his character as a leader.

Jethro was the prudent and wise chieftain of the Midianite tribe and his fatherly advice was at Moses' service. But Moses' work as a shepherd meant that from time to time he had long periods of solitude which were favourable to meditation on spiritual matters.

So with his cloak over his arm and carrying the traditional shepherd's crook, he set out for the tents of Jethro in Midian, close to the Sinai range, just as, long ago, Jacob had taken the road to Haran.

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# MOSES' SOJOURN IN MIDIAN

*Moses fled from Pharaoh and made for the land of Midian (Exod. 2: 15).*

The biblical scribe appears to have taken the relevant facts about the situation of this country for granted, and so does not pause to give us any information about it. Nor do the succeeding chapters describe its geographical position or the racial characteristics of its people. It is left to the student to find all this out.

### **The Midianites and their country**

What then was their origin? According to the Bible we should consider them as remote descendants of Abraham. It says that Midian was the son of Keturah, one of the servants selected by Abraham as a concubine after Sarah's death. In order to avoid disputes with Isaac, his lawful heir, when the time for the succession came, Abraham was careful to dispatch all the sons of his concubines to distant places.<sup>1</sup> They went *eastward, to the east country* (Gen. 25: 5), with of course a good supply of livestock. Midian was one of these second-class children, since his mother was a slave. The Israelites,

<sup>1</sup> See preceding volume in the series, *Abraham, Loved by God*.

therefore, could consider the Midianites near relations, although of inferior rank.

Modern ethnologists prefer to take the view that they were closely connected with the Arameans, but that the bonds of friendship between the two groups had grown steadily more tenuous with time.

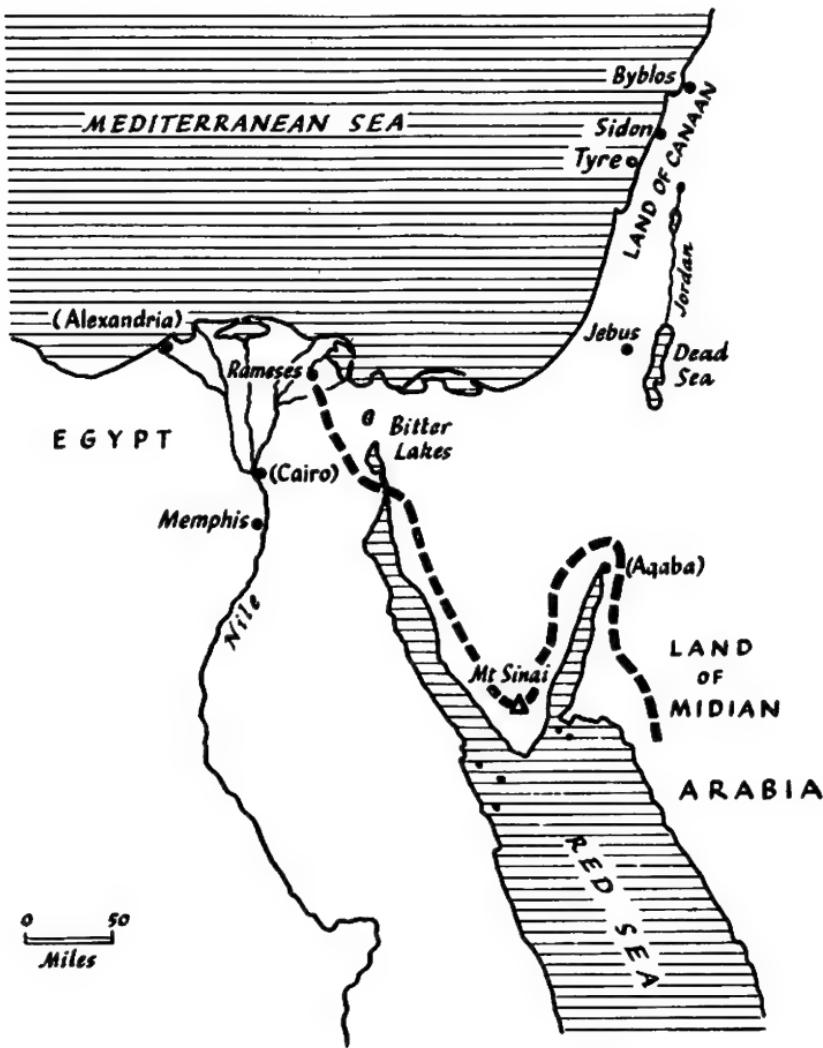
The position is confusing, because the Bible sometimes depicts the Midianite-Kenite forces as allies of the Israelites (Judges 1: 16; 4: 11, 17; 1 Sam. 15: 6); sometimes it says that the People of God waged savage and relentless war against them (Judges 6: 11–24; 7: 1–25; 8: 1–3). Then, sometimes they are said to have set up their tents in the far south of Canaan in the neighbourhood of Sinai; at others, in Jordan, east of the Dead Sea; and yet again, in the north at the great northern curve of the Euphrates. They seem to crop up everywhere.

The truth, however, is easily understood. Like the Arameans (of which the Hebrews were a branch), the Midianites were shepherd nomads of the steppe, and their clans were scattered in most places of that part of the Fertile Crescent which extends from the mountains of Syria to the Dead Sea.

Each of these groups developed in its own way, as the result of alliances, of the mingling of blood and the influence of alien religions. These pastoral groups remained nominally Midianite, but in their social and religious structure they underwent significant alterations. That is why, during Israel's troubled history, it came into opposition with Midianite encampments in some places and collaborated with them closely in others.

After considerable argument, orientalists now agree that the geographical position of Midian is on the east of the gulf of Aqaba, one of the two narrow branches of the Red Sea which enclose the Sinai peninsular.

It is relevant to mention here the two main sources of



MOSES FLEES TO THE COUNTRY OF MIDIAN

the wealth of this region: first, the pastureland on the hillsides and in the valleys where irrigation is easy; and secondly, some amount of silver, and especially of copper ore, and a little farther south, even of gold. These ores could be extracted without difficulty. This explains why the Midianite tribes were early described as both shepherds and smiths. They were given the special name of Kenites.

### Why Moses chose Midian as a refuge

Like all totalitarian states Egypt was equipped with a powerful police system. After the murder which he had just committed, Moses was obliged to flee. What direction should he take? Would it be west of the Delta, into Canaan? Decidedly not, for had he gone to the land of his ancestors, he would have had to cross a frontier bristling with Egyptian fortresses, patrols and sentries. Would it be eastward, into Libya? There, among Egypt's enemies, a refugee would certainly have been welcome. But in order to reach it, the roads across the plains of the Delta would have had to be used, and these would be crowded with troops. In addition, these roads were closely watched. Should he, then, go up the Nile valley? That would have meant certain death.

There was indeed only one solution: the steppe of Sinai or, still better, the shores of the Red Sea. There, Moses might well come across a pastoral tribe of his own people or one related to it. In this region, on the coast of the gulf of Aqaba, Egypt's power was not felt; the Rameses dynasty had no interest in these remote and deprived regions; its objective was Palestine and Syria. Gangs did occasionally extract copper and turquoises from the mines on Sinai, but the Egyptian sovereigns had little ambition to extend their dominion over the Arabian coast. The nomad tribes of this area consequently

## Moses' Sojourn in Midian

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enjoyed complete independence. Here, and here alone, could the fugitive find safety.

The land of Midian was also on the caravan route linking the Euphrates by way of the Fertile Crescent, with the coasts of Arabia on the littoral of the Red Sea, and even farther south, by ship to Ethiopia. Along these routes used by merchants, news travelled quickly. From this observation post, Moses would be able to take note of possible future changes in Egypt.

### **'Moses made for the land of Midian. And he sat down beside a well' (Exod. 2: 15)**

In the East at that time, when a stranger came to a place where he had neither friends or relations, he would go to the gate, if it was a city, or to the well, if it was a rural area. His attitude showed his need; he was looking for a kindly person who would speak to him and ask him to his house or his tent. It was the only course for a lonely man to follow, and, especially, the only way to become a member of a new community.

There are many attractive and picturesque accounts of scenes around a well, and the one involving Moses is an example of this tradition. Some shepherdesses with their flocks came together to the well and began to fill the troughs for their sheep to drink. They were followed by some young shepherds who started to drive the women away in order to take their place. Moses came to their defence, drove off the shepherds, and watered the sheep himself. When the shepherdesses reached their father's camp, he was surprised at their coming home so soon. They told him what had happened. '*Why did you leave the man there? Ask him to eat with us*' (Exod. 2: 20), the chieftain replied. It was in this manner that Moses found his way into the tents of Jethro, the patriarch of Midian.

### Jethro: The 'priest', the chieftain, the man

He was welcomed with the warmth that is customary among nomad shepherds on such occasions, especially since he shared their blood, had Abraham as his ancestor like them, and so belonged to the same race as they. *Moses settled with this man who gave him his daughter Zipporah in marriage* (Exod. 11: 21). The Hebrew refugee had thus become a member of Jethro's clan.

Two points may puzzle the reader of the Bible: first, the different names given to Jethro; secondly, the title 'priest' which the Bible gives him as soon as he appears.

Three names in succession are mentioned: Reuel, priest of Midian, or Rekkel, in some translations (Exod. 2: 18); Jethro, priest of Midian (Exod. 3: 1); and Hobab, son of Reuel, the Midianite (Numb. 10: 29). This may be due to different traditions, or to erroneous interpretations originating in misleading glosses. But the important point is that these variations all agree that he was chieftain of the tribe of Midian. Following the majority of biblical scholars he will continue to be called Jethro here.

But why a priest? In fact Jethro in common with all the nomad rulers of this remote period was a 'priest', in other words he was the sole officiant of the pastoral community, the only person qualified to perform the ritual sacrifices, the one valid intercessor between the band of shepherds and the god whose protection he invoked. Some historians have suggested that Jethro was the guardian of the ancient Semitic tradition according to which a god of past ages was venerated, one already known to a narrow circle of shepherds by the name of Yahweh; on this hypothesis, it was Jethro who really revealed to Moses both the name and the powers of Yahweh who was to become Israel's god in the future. But the inherent difficulties of this view will become obvious when the visit made by Jethro to Moses (then

encamped at the foot of Sinai) is discussed.

Jethro was a very experienced head of a tribe; he was a sensitive and realistic administrator, and Moses paid a glad and thankful tribute to this fact on several occasions during his life. He was not a man given to compliments, so when he expresses his deep respect, his entire submission and his unquestioning obedience to his father-in-law's judgement, the fact is worth stressing. He 'bowed low' before Jethro (Exod. 18: 7). When Jethro severely criticized a judicial procedure established by Moses after the theophany on Sinai, and said to him '*it is not right*' (Exod. 18: 17), Moses at once accepted the reform proposed by his father-in-law. *Moses took his advice and did as he said* (Exod. 18: 24). These abrupt and incisive scriptural interjections show the presence of a superior personality whose influence in awakening and developing the potential genius in Moses was great.

We have already seen that the Midianites had a special interest in metal work. Its Kenite branch (to which, as the Bible indicates, Jethro belonged) was particularly distinguished in this sphere. Its members were called 'the copper-smiths of the desert'. These nomads were always leading their flocks to fresh pastures, and at the same time they sent out a select few to inquire whether neighbouring camps had any copper vessels that needed mending, or which they wished to sell. The shepherds needed the services of these tinkers, but affected to despise them: their work, unlike shepherding, lacked nobility. In any case, it was extremely tiring and not likely to prove attractive to those whose concern was sheep. However, these craftsmen and their business activity had gradually civilized the Kenites by giving them contact with technical and artistic methods and clients of all sorts. This was the environment, with its developed culture, in which Moses spent many years.

### Was Moses in Midian a common shepherd?

Jethro had given him Zipporah, one of his daughters, in marriage. Two sons were born; the first was named Gershom, because, said Moses, '*I am a stranger in a foreign land*' (Exod. 2: 22; 18: 3). The second was called Eliezer (Exod. 18: 4).<sup>2</sup> The scribe, tireless in explaining proper names, gives its meaning: *The God of my father is my help and has delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.*

Moses was now married, the son-in-law of the wealthy head of a tribe, whose friend and assistant he had become, and with his share of communal duties. He seems to have settled down to an entirely pastoral existence. This former Egyptian scribe, the son and grandson of shepherds, had promptly become an Aramean nomad again, the guardian of sheep and goats, in every way like his ancestors who had led their flocks in the Fertile Crescent from one pasture to another, from one well to the next, for thousands of years.

From Moses' movements recorded in Exodus we may conclude that the number of Jethro's beasts was significant. As soon as a tribe came to own a reasonably-sized flock, it was necessary to divide it, giving each group pastures well apart from those of the others. This was all the more urgent in these regions because good pasture was rare. Shepherds thought little of taking their animals hundreds of miles in search of nourishing grass. Moses is said to have set up his camp in Horeb, near Sinai, nearly a hundred miles (or 120 if the inevitable wanderings are taken into account) from Jethro's tents on the eastern coast of the gulf of Aqaba. This was in no sense an excessive journey for small animals, and the distance was quite reasonable for a change of pasture of some importance. *Moses was looking after the flock of*

<sup>2</sup> An etymology drawn from popular usage, which is always ready to see in proper names a play on words. For their particular purpose, in this instance, only the first syllable, *ger* has been retained. It means: foreigner, resident.

## Moses' Sojourn in Midian

---

*Jethro, his father-in-law* (Exod. 3: 1). A hasty reading of these words might suggest that Moses was simply a herdsman on his own, whose work was to take care of a flock, yet to describe him as a mere shepherd does not fit in to the context. At every point he is seen to act as the chieftain's close collaborator. And it looks as if in his recent establishment in the pastures of Sinai, he acted as the head of a pastoral community, subject, of course, to the authority, for the moment somewhat remote, of Jethro.

### **Moses, a shepherd of a special kind**

In fact, the rest of the narrative makes it plain that neither intellectually nor spiritually can Moses be compared with any other Kenite chief of the period. Although he was closely incorporated in a Midianite tribe, married to a Midianite woman, and the father of Midianite children, he remained a Hebrew by blood and in spirit: his heart never left the distant land of Rameses. His future mission, it can be said, was potentially within him, and he never questioned the imposing role that was to be his. We can feel that he was ready to be used, ready to leave his adopted country and give himself body and soul to the work of delivering his brethren, the sons of Jacob, still groaning in harsh slavery in the Egyptian land of Goshen.

Naturally he did not consider himself exempt from the stern business of his herdsman's task; the supervision of sheep and men; the careful selection of dates and places for a change of pasture; the search for watering-places and for ground with fodder.

### **Death of Rameses. The Burning Bush**

In 1224 the noble, powerful and formidable Rameses II died. In the Near East such news travelled swiftly. Official messengers and the drivers of camel caravans proclaimed the change in dynasty practically everywhere.

Rameses' son, Menepkah, was the new monarch. The news created profound disturbances throughout the empire. West of the Delta, the Libyans, always restless, took advantage of the new political situation and rose threateningly. In the east, the Canaanite princelings, vassals of the late pharaoh, believed it to be a propitious moment to throw off the Egyptian yoke and make an attempt to regain their independence. In the Nile valley itself there was some opposition to Menepkah. The majestic and monolithic solidity of Rameses' empire seemed really to be in danger; revolt was widespread.

The Hebrews in Goshen, still engaged in building works, began to hope. Would the pharaoh's death mean an end to their frightful slavery? Logically they might well have thought that they would soon be able to return to their true and original calling as shepherds. Unfortunately, Menepkah seemed determined to continue his father's building programme, and so the Hebrews remained subject to forced labour; the work of the chain gang in brick-making followed the same rhythm as before. Exodus records: *The sons of Israel, groaning, cried out for help and from the depths of their slavery their cry came up to God.* In these ancient texts a primitive anthropomorphism is still customary: *God heard their groaning and he called to mind his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God looked down kindly upon the sons of Israel* (Exod. 2: 23–25).

At this time, Moses, with his tents and animals, was wandering in the plain of Sinai. Was it a caravan from Egypt coming to Arabia on business that told the leader of the isolated little camp the great news of such concern to everyone in the Middle East: 'Rameses is dead'? Very probably.

The rest of the story leaves no doubt about the thoughts that were always troubling him. A day came, probably

while he was looking for new pastures on one of the slopes of Horeb (that is, Sinai)<sup>3</sup> when he saw a flame rising from a bush.

**'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob'** (Exod. 3: 6)

There now followed a series of pictures in stark outline and in a quick succession.

1. Surprise and very human curiosity: '*I must go and look at this strange sight and see why the bush is not burnt.*'
2. The encounter with God: *Yahweh saw him go forward to look, and God called to him from the middle of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' 'Here I am,' he answered.*
3. An announcement of the sacred nature of the place and consequently of the command: *'Come no nearer. Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.'*

In their archaic forms of worship, the Semites, before drawing near to a holy place, in the open air or in a building, took care to bathe; they put on clothes that had been scrupulously washed; and before entering the sacred enclosure they took off their shoes. All these precautions were taken to make certain that no alien influences, no hostile elements accidentally associated with the believer's body or clothes through previous contacts, should be near the deity to be worshipped. It is a strange spiritual precaution which is exemplified in Islam today; a Mohammedan must remove his shoes before crossing the threshold of a mosque.

The Lord declared who he was: '*I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.*' Each of these three patriarchs had been favoured with an experience of the only God, probably

<sup>3</sup> There is now practically unanimous agreement as to the exact geographical position of the biblical Sinai. It is now called Jebel Musa: its summit rises to 7449 feet.

through their minds or imaginations. He appeared to give them a message, a revelation, or to correct some spiritual deviation in their lives. In this series of theophanies, that granted to Jacob was historically the last. In Egypt, Joseph had been made aware of the effects of divine protection, but this had made itself felt solely through those secret and subtle ways which Christians call Providence. Neither he, nor his eleven brothers nor any other of Jacob's descendants had been summoned to receive any instruction or message from God. During both the centuries of happiness spent by the Hebrews in the Delta area, and in their time of servitude in the region of Pi-Rameses, the God of Abraham had not thought it necessary to manifest himself to the People of the Covenant. Now, suddenly, in the magnificent setting of the Sinai range, he appeared — or rather, he spoke — to Moses: 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'

*At this Moses covered his face.* According to ancient Semitic belief, no human being can bear the sight of God: it would strike him dead. For the Being thus shown him is utterly transcendent.

Moses was told his mission. For the moment it seemed to be a work entirely on the plane of history: '*I mean to deliver (my people) out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up<sup>4</sup> out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow<sup>5</sup> . . . I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt.*'

Moses' immediate reaction to this mission was to plead

<sup>4</sup> For the traveller going towards the mountain ranges of Palestine from the lowlands of the Delta, the way lies 'upward'.

<sup>5</sup> The highly chalky nature of the soil of Canaan does not in fact merit such exalted terms. But all things are relative; and to nomad shepherds, compelled to journey across regions of semi-wilderness burnt up by the sun in summer, the cultivated plains and grass-covered valleys of the land we call Palestine might well have seemed delightful places.

## Moses' Sojourn in Midian

---

that the task was too great for him: '*Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?*' The answer was rapid and brief: '*I shall be with you.*'

Everything seemed to have been said. But the narrative continues with an unexpected note of explanation. This concerned the name by which the God of the Old Testament wished to be invoked and reverenced: it was the revelation, or at least the solemn proclamation of the sacred title Yahweh – '*I Am who I Am*'.

### 'I Am who I Am'

At this point it is essential to quote the passage in which God tells Moses his divine name: Yahweh. This done we shall be better placed to evaluate some particular biblical terms and to enter into the general meaning of the dialogue which the modern reader may find somewhat obscure. It marks a new beginning of great importance in the history of the religions of Israel and Christianity and in the spiritual development of mankind. It is brief and yet bristling with difficulties.

*Then Moses said to God, 'I am to go, then, to the sons of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you". But if they ask what his name is, what am I to tell them?' And God said to Moses, 'I Am who I Am'. 'This' he added, 'is what you must say to the sons of Israel: "I Am has sent me to you".' And God also said to Moses, 'You are to say to the sons of Israel: "Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you". This is my name for all time; by this name I shall be invoked for all generations to come' (Exod. 3: 13–15).*

### Why Moses asked God to reveal his name

Exodus says that it was in order that Moses might convince the people of the authenticity of his mission. All the same, modern man is a little startled to find Moses

asking the name of the Being who had just told him that he was the God of the fathers, that is, the patriarchs. In fact, however, the reasons for Moses' question are much more profound than might appear at first sight. He needed to know 'the name', the Lord's *real* name; and the sons of Israel also needed to know it accurately. The ritual of the ancient eastern religions throws a strange light on this matter.

In earlier books in this series, the importance attached to a name in these regions has been emphasized.<sup>6</sup> In the ancient Middle East the name borne by an individual cannot, as with us, be compared to a label identifying us and enabling us to identify one of our fellows and to differentiate him in practice from another. In the East, the actual syllables of a man's first name (for at this time surnames did not exist) were thought to contain a real power that exercised a controlling influence over his character and even determined his destiny. A name affected the personality, expressed and conditioned it. So that to know someone's name was to penetrate his inner nature, in some way to take possession of him, to exercise a 'dominion' over him.

Proper allowance being made, this explains why Moses considered it imperative to know with accuracy the name of the God who was speaking to him and not merely by a vague paraphrase such as 'God of the fathers'. This need was inherited, as we have seen, from polytheistic belief of the past, and it may be opportune to give the historical reasons for the urgent concern of the Easterns to know what their protecting divinities were called.

Take the case of a group of believers before an altar. (Among the Semites this was of extreme simplicity,

<sup>6</sup> See the preceding volume in the series, *Abraham, Loved by God*: it explains why the name Abram was changed into Abraham (p. 117); cf. also, *Isaac and Jacob, God's Chosen Ones* (p. 77), why God bestowed on Jacob the new name of Israel.

## Moses' Sojourn in Midian

---

heap of stones, or a block of beaten earth.) Their aim would be to compel the tribal god to answer their petition and to come in person to the place where sacrifice was being offered to him. To this end, he was summoned by his true name, usually a secret known to his worshippers alone. It is understandable that in the ancient legends the gods should be represented as very reluctant to tell their names: it put them, so to say, into the hands of men.<sup>7</sup>

This historical background illustrates the inner meaning of Moses' theological request: 'What is your name?'

### Is the name Yahweh a genuine reply to Moses' question?

Some Hebrew scholars say No, whereas most theologians say Yes. Before examining the two views and to be able to follow their arguments, a brief word must be said on the etymological and grammatical meaning of the sacred word Yahweh.

Modern orientalists are practically all agreed that Yahweh was the original and authentic spelling, the w being pronounced *ou*. This, as we shall see is important.

Literal translations of the word have not been lacking. It has, for instance, been said to stand for: 'He causes to exist' (that is, creates); 'He brings to life'; 'He brings things about' (that is, historical events in particular). Others see it as expressing the special powers of a storm

<sup>7</sup> We may remember that when Jacob crossed the Jabbok he passed the night with a mysterious being whom he finally recognized as the God of his fathers. (Cf. *Isaac and Jacob, God's Chosen Ones*, p. 75.) Dawn was breaking when Jacob's adversary (doubtless to be understood in a purely spiritual sense) gave him a new name indicating his future mission; it was *Israel*, that is *May God show his strength*. Jacob-Israel was emboldened to ask: 'I beg you, tell me your name.' God absolutely refused: 'Why do you ask my name?' Evidently, therefore, in the still-clouded age of the patriarchs, we encounter the old Semitic prudence of a god who will not lightly reveal his name. In fact, Jacob had gone ahead too quickly. Yahweh seems to have thought that the time was not yet ripe; it was not until Sinai that the ineffable name was — as we shall see in a moment — given to Moses with the injunction to proclaim it and to demand that it should be used *for all time . . . for all generations to come* (Exod. 3: 15).

god: 'He blows'; 'He destroys'; 'He speaks'. But this exegesis is out of date, and has few defenders.

The view now held is that it is an archaic derivation of the verb 'to be': *hayah*. In some passages in the Bible, and even outside it, we find, as a designation of Yahweh, the words Yah or Yaoh, very ancient forms of 'to be'. So the translation of the phrase (in Greek) given in the Septuagint<sup>8</sup> would appear to be most fortunate; the Hebrew words '*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*' are best understood as meaning 'I am the one who am'.

Two lines further, Yahweh, speaking to Moses, again declared '*You are to say to the sons of Israel: He is, 'Ehyeh, has sent me to you'*'.

This additional aspect ends the discussion: the verb 'to be' unquestionably underlies the divine name. 'I am the One who is his own existence', 'I am the One who eternally is'. Hence: the Eternal.

Some orientalists take the view that the expression: 'I am the One who is' cannot be considered to be a sufficient reply. The question asked by Moses is clear and direct, but the phrase '*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*' implies – at least according to these scholars – a kind of refusal to reveal 'the name'. They agree that at first sight it might be thought that Yahweh had complied with Moses' request. But it was not so: it was a cautious paraphrase which he put into circulation, without in any way involving himself. The God of Sinai took great care not to reveal his name and so enable men to lay hold of his essential reality.

This point of view has been strongly contested by eminent theologians who are students of Hebrew as well.

<sup>8</sup> This is the first translation of the Bible into Greek; it was made in Alexandria. Formerly, on account of various documents (the letter of Aristeus), it was held that it dated from about 200 B.C. It is now believed that the books of the Bible of 'the seventy' (that is, the team of translators) appeared at different times; the dates cannot be precisely determined.

## Moses' Sojourn in Midian

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They believe that the expression '*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*' is an enlightening and powerfully original reply, given by the creator of all things to Moses and thereby to all men. It is surely obvious that our finite minds lack the ability to grasp the essentially infinite transcendence of God. The definition given, they say, befits our intellectual stature, and is the very opposite of a cunning refusal to reply. The '*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*' gives us all that a human being can comprehend about God: his unity, eternity, power, uniqueness and infinite perfections. A God on all points utterly different from the foreign gods who are non-existent and to be considered by the Hebrews as nought.

Yahweh is 'the One who is'. He said: '*This is my name for all time; by this name I shall be invoked for all generations to come.*'

### But was not this name, Yahweh, already known before the dialogue on Sinai ?

While they were still nomads, the Hebrews had two names at their disposal wherewith to designate the God who protected them. In a number of places in Genesis these names occur: El 'Elohim and 'El Shaddai.<sup>9</sup>

The biblical text is definite, at least as regards the second name, which seems to have been the special perquisite of the patriarchal clan. '*I am Yahweh*' said the Being who spoke with Moses on Sinai. '*I am Yahweh. To Abraham, Isaac and Jacob I appeared as 'El Shaddai.*'

<sup>9</sup> *Elohim*, the plural ('of power') of El, that is god (probable root: to be strong). It seems that originally the name El denoted, in the Semitic communities, a vague and formidable body of occult forces; we meet the word in this sense in Assyrian (el), Hebrew ('el), and Arabic (ilah) writings. Later, it took on a plural form, and came to designate a local god; in principle, this was the predominating god of a clan, a tribe, a city or a region. This plural (Elohim) is also used – in the singular – to emphasize the power of a particular supra-terrestrial being. As regards 'El-Shaddai (God of the mountain; a mountain God – from *sadu* a mountain), it seems to have been a specifically Hebrew title, an ancient divine name adopted in the period of the patriarchs. These latter also now and then made use of the old Semitic term widespread in the Middle East – 'El or 'Elohim, which at that time itself had the meaning of a personalized god.

*did not make myself known to them by my name of Yahweh' (Exod. 6: 2-3).*

That is clear. It comes from the 'Priestly' tradition and it makes lucidly explicit what was implicit in the extract from the 'Elohist' tradition given above: '*You are to say to the sons of Israel: Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name for all time . . .*' (Exod. 3: 15).

It is true that the name Yahweh already occurs in Genesis in the chapters ascribed by biblical scholars to the 'Yahwist' tradition, thought to be older than the Elohist. (The 'Priestly' tradition was put in writing later.) In Genesis 2: 18-23, for instance, we read: *Yahweh-God fashioned all the wild beasts . . . and then man from woman.*

This being the situation, how are the two statements to be reconciled? On the one hand, the Elohist and Priestly compilers say that the name Yahweh was first revealed on Sinai; on the other, the Yahwist tradition (whose basic elements probably go back to the pastoral period of the patriarchs) suggests that it had been in use more than five hundred years before the time of Moses.

We must accept the evidence and agree that the name Yahweh had been used previously, not indeed among all Abraham's descendants, but at least in some restricted circles.

Besides, if it had been entirely unknown to the sons of Israel, it would have been very difficult for Moses to have offered himself to the Hebrews in Egypt as one sent by a God whom none of them had ever worshipped. It would also be difficult to explain the name (containing the name of God) of Moses' mother Jochebed, which some Hebrew scholars translate: 'Yo (Yahweh) is my glory'.

The word, therefore, was not coined originally on

## Moses' Sojourn in Midian

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Sinai. But it was after Sinai that appreciation of its rich theological connotation began. This is what was in the mind of the author of the 'Priestly code'. In spite of its limitations, it intrinsically contains an element of transcendent mystery, and its lofty spirituality sets it above the somewhat too material title of mountain God.

### **Conclusion of the incident of the burning bush on Horeb**

The leaping, burning flame continued to spring up from the lonely bush (probably one of those clumps of acacia that are scattered over the steppe of Horeb). The Voice had begun by telling Moses about the mission awaiting him: to bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt. Then it uttered the special name by which Yahweh wished to be invoked in future.

Yahweh went on to explain to his envoy the plan he was to follow. Moses was to go back to Goshen and tell the Hebrews that the God of their fathers had appeared to him. They were to get ready to leave the Delta permanently and return to Canaan, the home of the patriarchs, *where milk and honey flow*. Then, together with the elders of the tribe, Moses was to visit Pharaoh, and ask that the Hebrews might be allowed to go and sacrifice to Yahweh in the desert, three days' journey from the frontiers. The king of Egypt would harshly refuse; but in the end, when Egypt had been hard hit by Israel's God, he would decide to authorize the Hebrews' departure.

There followed an intimate conversation between Yahweh and Moses, which proves most revealing of the characteristics of Moses' personality: its strength and also its humility and even surprising timidity. He was a prophet and was soon to become an authoritative law-giver and an incomparable leader of men, and yet not the least trace of ambition can be observed in him. There is no craving for honours, no lust for power. What we see

is genuine modesty shown in an almost panic fear in face of the work to be begun and brought to conclusion.

It was a lively dialogue in which Moses made an effort to decline his mission; some of his reasons for doing so border on disrespect. '*What if they will not believe me?*' he asked, '*or listen to my words and say to me: "Yahweh has not appeared to you?"*' At this point the account in Exodus says that God enabled Moses to work wonders of a sort that would convince the Hebrews unwilling to believe in the mission of a mere shepherd. Yahweh told him to throw his staff on the ground. It immediately changed into a snake. Yahweh then told him to pick it up by its tail, whereupon it became a staff again. Next, he was asked to put his hand into his bosom; when he withdrew it, leprosy had made it white. He was told to replace it, and when he took it out again it was completely restored. All this is typically Egyptian; the people were fascinated by the marvellous. Snake-charmers and every brand of wonder-worker were to be seen at all the street corners. Moses, however, was now equipped to surpass them; he was in a position, as God's instrument, to convince his fellow Hebrews both of the divine power and of the authenticity of his own mission.

Even so, Moses did not agree at once; he maintained his refusal and it seemed to be final: '*But, my Lord, never in my life have I been a man of eloquence, . . . I am a slow speaker and not able to speak well.*' Yahweh replied: '*I shall help you to speak and tell you what to say.*' Moses, however, still persisted; he was unwilling to listen and vehemently rejected this offer of collaboration in a task that was beyond him. Not that he was a coward; it was simply the result of that humility and timidity that never left him. He said: '*If it please you, my Lord, send anyone you will.*' So Moses was given an assistant: '*There is your brother Aaron the Levite, is there not? I know that he*

## Moses' Sojourn in Midian

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*is a good speaker. . . You will speak to him and tell him what message to give . . . he will be your mouthpiece.'* So Moses' final argument, his lack of eloquence, was demolished. The discussion was brought abruptly to an end: '*Take this staff into your hand; with this you will perform the signs.*' We shall see it at work on several occasions.

### Moses returns to Goshen

Despite the fast-moving nature of the narrative, there can be discerned those inner conflicts by which for some time Moses was disturbed. In the end he made up his mind to accept the mission. He could not, of course, just leave Jethro's flocks to wander about on the slopes of Sinai. He was obliged to return to Midian with the animals and tents and take leave of the chieftain. He explained the position to his father-in-law, who gave his approval. '*Go in peace,*' he said. We shall shortly encounter this wise old chieftain again.

So the former Egyptian scribe made his way back to the home of his people in that corner of the Delta where they were still subject to forced labour. He travelled along the road to Egypt; a donkey trotted by his side bearing his wife Zipporah and his sons Gershom and Eliezer, but family life seems to have played a very small part in the existence of Israel's future leader.

On the road to Egypt there occurred a series of strange and rather obscure events. One of these happened when the party halted for a night's rest. Possibly on account of the arduous nature of the forced march, combined with his overpowering anxiety concerning his coming interview with Pharaoh, Moses, physically and morally exhausted, fell seriously ill. *Yahweh came to meet him and tried to kill him,* is the rather odd comment in the Bible. The phrase is acceptable if it is remembered that

Yahweh is the lord of life and death and the phrase that of the primitive story-teller. We should say nowadays that Moses was so worn out that he was at death's door. At this point took place the circumcision of one of his sons, though we are not told which one it was.

At this part of the story it should be recalled that Moses himself was not circumcised, and indeed he never was, for at that time the Israelites did not attribute the same significance to this ritual mutilation as became customary after the exile in Babylon (586–538).

Zipporah may have thought that possibly Moses had fallen ill because one of her sons was uncircumcised, and that her husband himself had also not undergone the operation. She appears on this occasion to have acted energetically. She *cut off her son's foreskin and with it she touched the genitals* (literally, the feet) *of Moses. 'Truly, you are a bridegroom of blood to me!' she said. And Yahweh let him live.* We can only say that through the real circumcision of her son and the symbolic circumcision of her husband, as well as by the blood-offering, she believed that she had appeased the divine anger and, we may believe, saved Moses from death.

Moses recovered and took to the road again, this time, it seems alone. Although the Bible remains silent on the point, it seems reasonable to suppose that he sent Zipporah and the children back to Jethro's camp. After the incident of the circumcision Moses' wife no longer appears at his side. Possibly Moses needed to be free from family cares if he was to carry out the formidable task entrusted to him. It was only later, in fact, when he and his fellow Hebrews, having come out of Egypt, had set up their tents at the foot of Sinai, that Jethro appears again, bringing Zipporah and the children to him (Exod. 18: 2). This section of the narrative undoubtedly contains many obscure points.

## Moses' Sojourn in Midian

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On his way from Midian, Moses paused at the 'mountain of God' (Horeb or Sinai) in the same neighbourhood where he had previously camped and heard the voice from the burning bush. Here he encountered his brother Aaron who, commanded by God, had set out to meet him. The two embraced with a warmth that can be imagined. *Moses then told Aaron all that Yahweh had said . . . and all the signs he had ordered him to perform* (Exod. 4: 28). Afterwards they continued the exhausting journey towards Goshen in the Delta and at length could perceive the tents of the Israelites in the distance.

## THE TEN PLAGUES OF EGYPT

As soon as they reached the Delta, Moses and Aaron approached the elders of the Israelite tribes, and explained the plan for a return to Canaan, and secured their agreement to this act of deliverance. Moses performed some wonders in the sight of the people and these convinced them that the God of their fathers really intended to free them from slavery. It was a promising start to the mission.

The second stage of the task had now to be begun without delay. Pharaoh, lord of the Nile valley, had to be persuaded to authorize the departure. God had warned Moses that he would encounter a series of refusals and that in the end the king would only give way to force. The biblical author does not give the name of this particular pharaoh, but he was most probably Menephtah, the son of Rameses II.

### **Meneptah (1224–1210, pharaoh of the Exodus**

Here again the biblical narrative is closely connected with the history of the ancient Near East. In fact, the Exodus, the Hebrews' flight from Egypt, can only be seen in its true light in the context of the political events of the period.

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

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The death of Rameses II, and the accession of his son Menepkah, gave the signal for Canaan to rebel. Menepkah at once led his army into Palestine and pushed on into Syria. It was an arduous campaign, but it ended with the re-establishment of Egyptian supremacy over these regions.

Meanwhile, west of the various outlets of the Nile, a formidable threat was developing. Menepkah's reign coincided with a migration of warrior bands into the eastern basin of the Mediterranean. These were the swarms of invaders called by the Egyptians, the 'Peoples of the Sea'. Their earliest advances had tried to secure a footing in the Delta in the reign of Rameses II. They conceived an ingenious idea of an alliance with the Libyans – Egypt's traditional enemies on the African coast, west of the Delta – so that they could carry out a combined assault on the Egyptians. The aim was to obtain a hold on Egypt comparable to that of the Hyksos, five hundred years earlier. It was a moment of grave danger. Menepkah could not take personal command of his troops, nevertheless, the Egyptian forces managed to repel this attack.

Despite these defensive victories, won, it seemed, by a hair's breadth, the whole Near East was quite aware that the era of Rameses II was over. Menepkah wanted appeasement, and therefore he ordered a stele to be set up on which, in properly pharaonic language, his recent military triumphs were suitably praised; on this stone were engraved the names of the peoples he had subdued. In this list occurs the name of Israel. It was the first time in ancient history that this name had appeared in an official document – and this was an Egyptian document. But its exact meaning is a matter of disagreement among experts.

The composition and engraving of this famous stele of

black granite, known as Meneptah's stele, dates from the fifth year of this pharaoh's reign, that is 1220 B.C. It was dug up in the plain of Thebes at the end of the last century (1896) near the colossi of Memnon. The translation of the relevant passage runs: 'The princes are overthrown and cry out: Shalom. Not one of the vassals lifts its head. Tohenu has been laid waste; Hatti is at peace; Canaan and all its evil doers have been sacked; Ascalon is in exile; Gezer is in chains; Yanu'an annihilated. Israel has been devastated, it has no more crops. Palestine is now like a widow to Tamari.'<sup>1</sup>

In this war communiqué one sentence in particular demands attention: 'Israel has been devastated'. Israel, which appears here in the list of Meneptah's conquests, occurs in a series of clearly identified names: Canaan, Ascalon, Gezer, with Palestine as the concluding item. This raises a problem: how can it be that Israel, that is the sons of Jacob, should according to the stele, have been slaughtered in Canaan (the Palestine of today) by Meneptah, when we know for certain that at this time, they were encamped in Goshen where this same Meneptah was forcing them to make bricks. In other words, were they in Canaan or in Egypt? A choice must be made.

Modern scholars have clarified the issue. The Israel devastated by the Egyptians, the Israel that had no more crops is identified, without much risk of error, with one of the following groups:

1. A body of Hebrews, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who did not follow Joseph into Egypt, may well have remained in the pastures of the central moun-

<sup>1</sup> In the Egyptian text, the Canaanite word 'Shalom' has been retained. Literally, it means: Goodwill! or Peace! Here, it must be translated by: Grace! Tohenu: an African tribe in Libya: 'Hatti' – the Hittites whose capital was Hattushash (Boghaz-Keni) in the heart of Asia Minor. Ascalon and Gezer are well-known geographical names, but the exact position of them is still disputed. The last sentence should be interpreted thus: Tameri (a poetical name for Egypt) can henceforth consider Palestine as a contemptible adversary, like a widow who is without support, and has no one to defend her.

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

---

tains of Judah. It has already been suggested that the account of Joseph's adventure in Egypt was probably an historical summary, gathering into a single narrative a comprehensive survey of a number of migrations of Hebrew tribes into the Delta. Taking advantage of the Asiatic occupation of the Hyksos in north Egypt, small groups of Israelites must have followed each other, over a period of several centuries, into the flatland of the Nile. On the other hand, it is quite possible that a number of clans did not move from home and stayed firmly attached to their pastures in Palestine. In that case, it would be to these groups of genuine Hebrews to which the stele of Menepkah refers, and which he had severely punished for joining in the general movement of rebellion by the Canaanites against their Egyptian overlord.

2. We may also agree that a contingent of nomad shepherds, called either 'sons of Jacob' or 'sons of Joseph' had followed the Hyksos in their hasty retreat to the east, when the army of liberation led by the pharaoh Amosis (*c.* 1580), drove the Asiatic occupying power from Egyptian soil. It is true, however, that a section of the Hebrews remained in their camps in the Delta region, and we have explained why and how the new Egyptian government allowed these foreigners in its territory. But the presence of this Hebrew islet in Goshen is no proof that all the Israelite clans had stayed in the Delta. It is reasonable to suppose that some of them had made a prudent retreat to their native land in company with the Hyksos who were being swept from Egypt. And it was there, three hundred and fifty years later, that Menepkah had come across their camps and seen that they had allied themselves with the Canaanite rebels bent on breaking the political control of the pharaohs.

3. There is a further possible explanation, as reasonable as the others and not contradicting them, but throwing

fresh light on the sentence in the stele. It was mentioned above that Menephtah's reign began with political turbulence. In this situation, it is surely possible that some of the Hebrew clans took advantage of the rebellions inside and outside Egypt and took to the road so as to escape from the 'House of Bondage' and regain the pastures of Hebron or Beersheba. (At that time Moses was probably still in Midian tending his father-in-law's sheep.) These people had become weary of their slavery in Goshen and, giving their guards the slip, may have managed to reach Canaan. Once again, it would have been real Hebrews that Menephtah encountered. Hence the mention of Israel on his stele.

In any case, and whatever the explanation, it is a fact that, for the first time in the history of the ancient Middle East, the name of Israel occurs in an official document.

While Rameses reigned, an exodus would have been impossible, and difficult even to imagine. But in the time of Menephtah it falls naturally into the historical context, for then the empire was visibly beginning to weaken and break up. To an intelligent leader of men like Moses, therefore, it was time to make the most of these circumstances without delay: the Hebrews must be freed from bondage and led back to Canaan.

### The first, unsuccessful, approach undertaken by Moses and Aaron (Exod. 5-7: 8)

From the start, the dialogue went badly. Moses and Aaron asked permission for the tribes to make three days journey in the desert, and camp there, so that they might sacrifice to Yahweh. Pharaoh's anger can easily be understood: '*Who is Yahweh that I should listen to him . . . I know nothing of Yahweh. . . . What do you mean by taking the people away from their work. Get back to your labouring.*' In order to punish these 'idlers'

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

---

whose sole concern was the worship of their God, he decided to increase their work. They were to be given no more straw, and in spite of this serious handicap, the foremen were to ensure that every day the same number of bricks were produced as before. This decision needs explaining. The typical architecture of the Delta, which is entirely devoid of stone, made use of two kinds of brick; one kind was baked in ovens; the other was exposed to the blazing sun of the summer months, and was called 'unfired brick'. It was a primitive method of drying, but when used for the inside of walls, the bricks were entirely satisfactory. In order to strengthen the texture of the earth that had been treated in this way, it was usual to mix some chopped straw with it. Slaves were sent into the fields to gather the straw. Harvesters left a fair length of the corn stalks in the ground; for, at that time, the straw was cut with a clean stroke of the sickle at about half its height. So special teams were sent out after the harvest to collect what remained of the stubble and bring it to the workers who were moulding the clay. Pharaoh's punishment for their ill-considered request was to compel the brickmakers themselves to go into the fields and collect the straw, and in spite of this added duty, they were to supply the same number of finished bricks each day. But that number at once fell. The Hebrew foremen, appointed to control the work and held responsible for the output, were flogged. Anger against Moses and Aaron simmered in the Hebrew camp because their clumsy approach — that at least was what it was considered to be — had provoked Pharaoh's wrath against Israel.

Moses and Aaron were considerably perplexed. Had they not, in all conscience, carried out God's orders? The people reproached Moses bitterly. He turned to God, and in his familiar way, asked him: '*Lord, why do you treat*

*this people so harshly? Why did you send me here?*' God reassured him: '*You will see now how I shall punish Pharaoh.*'

### A preliminary to great wonders

It seems probable that Pharaoh wanted to find out just how far the supra-normal powers of Yahweh's ambassadors could go. This was quite natural curiosity on the part of an inhabitant of the Nile valley, steeped in magic, and it explains why the two Hebrews had resort to a series of spectacular signs, to give some idea of the power of their God. There then occurred a new version of something that had happened on Horeb. Aaron, who according to the command given by Yahweh on Sinai, was Moses' spokesman and collaborator, threw his staff to the ground and immediately it became a serpent. But Pharaoh had taken the precaution to summon 'his sages and sorcerers' and these, in their turn, produced the same marvel, even though Aaron's serpent swallowed up the magicians' staffs. The king was not in the least convinced of Yahweh's superiority over the gods of Egypt, and refusing any further discourse with the brothers, he sent them away.

The position was critical. It was time for the mighty blows that Yahweh had promised.

### The Ten Plagues of Egypt

The series of terrible and spectacular signs began forthwith.

#### **The first plague:** the water of the Nile turns to blood.

Moses came to pharaoh in the morning when he had gone to the river, probably to offer a sacrifice, for the river was a god. Moses again asked his permission for the Hebrews to go and worship Yahweh in the desert, and to show the reality of their God, under the king's very

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

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eyes, he proceeded to turn the Nile into a river of blood.

We now know that this 'marvel' which the Bible describes as terrifying is in fact an annual phenomenon, lasting seven days and occurring naturally during the flooding of the river. This is the sequence of events. To begin with, at the summer solstice, the river, swollen by the torrential rains in Ethiopia, rises steadily to nineteen or twenty-two feet above its normal level. Its waters, that have just crossed vast sluggish stretches of land in the distant Sudan, are at first sticky and viscous: this is the 'green Nile', and its water is dangerous to drink. Fortunately, its duration is brief, not more than four or five days. Then the volume of water rapidly increases, and when the flood has reached its full height it becomes reddish brown in colour for a week and looks very like blood; this is the 'red Nile'. The colour is due to countless numbers of fungi and infusoria coming from the central mountain-mass of Ethiopia. In October when the waters have withdrawn from the flooded soil of Egypt, the brownish deposit is left behind, and every year makes the fertility of the valley certain. It should be observed that the water of the 'red Nile' is excellent for drinking purposes, and the fish suffer no harm from the vegetation it carries at this stage.

This being the case, how did it come about that the Egyptians, accustomed for ages to this colouration of the river, occurring about the middle of August, should have shown such fear at Moses' 'marvel'?

Here again the Bible records that *the magicians of Egypt used their witchcraft to do the same*. They seem to have found little difficulty in producing an isolated example of the same phenomenon at the proper season. Little wonder that Pharaoh refused to listen to the petitioners any longer: he *turned away and went back to his palace, taking no notice even of this* (Exod. 7: 22-23).

### **The second plague: the frogs (Exod. 8: 1–11).**

Moses and Aaron approached Pharaoh again, and made a further threat. If he would not allow the Hebrews to go into the desert and worship their God, Egypt would be invaded by frogs.

In fact, this was a normal occurrence when the waters fell and the Nile returned gradually to its bed. The frogs then scattered themselves over the fields and at times, in spite of the ibis who eat them up all along the way, even came into the houses. Consequently Pharaoh's magicians found no difficulty – this being the right season – in imitating the 'marvel' produced by Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh, however, agreed that their people should go, provided the frogs went first. But as soon as the land was rid of them, he broke his word and forbade the Israelites to leave the building sites.

### **The third plague: the mosquitoes (Exod. 8: 12–15).**

At Moses' word, Aaron struck the dust on the ground with his staff and it was turned into dense clouds of mosquitoes. The magicians tried to do likewise, but failed. They felt bound to comment: '*This is the finger of God.*' But Meneptah remained obstinately deaf to the Hebrews' request. They must continue to shape bricks for the building of Pi-Rameses.

### **The fourth plague: the gadflies (Exod. 8: 16–28).**

These were very trying little creatures, and this succession of plagues sent by Israel's God into his land seemed at last to have worn Pharaoh down. He decided to grant Moses' request, at least in part. The Hebrews might sacrifice to Yahweh, but without crossing the frontier. Moses gave the obvious answer; the solution was not practical, for Yahweh's followers offered on his altar, animals, goats or even bulls, that were worshipped in the Delta. The Egyptians would stone them if they slaughtered these sacred animals. Pharaoh appeared to

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

---

appreciate the problem, and he gave permission for them to sacrifice in the desert, but 'not far' from the frontier. This obviously was not in accordance with Moses' secret purpose and he probably meant to take advantage of the three days' leave and organize a final departure. Menep-tah asked for the plague to end and Moses destroyed the gadflies, but Pharaoh remained adamant.

**The fifth plague:** the death of the livestock (Exod. 9: 1–7).

The Bible describes a fearful scourge: horses, donkeys, camels, oxen, sheep and goats, all died without exception. Those of Israel in the land of Goshen on the other hand, were spared as a matter of course, just as the people had been exempted from the other plagues. But Pharaoh was still adamant. He would not let them go.

**The sixth plague:** the boils (Exod. 9: 8–12).

This was a ghastly and widespread epidemic, affecting both men and beasts. Pharaoh remained stubborn.

**The seventh plague:** the hail (Exod. 9: 13–35).

Unlike the other 'blows' (in Hebrew *moftim*), this sudden alteration in the weather was not a common event in Egypt. Storms, thunder and hail, were extremely rare occurrences. In the evening Moses had made a point of visiting Pharaoh and gave him this message from Yahweh: *'Let my people go to offer me worship. This time I mean to send all my plagues on you and your courtiers and your subjects so that you shall learn that there is no one like me in the whole world. Had I stretched out my hand to strike you and your subjects with pestilence, you would have been swept from the earth. But I have let you live for this: to make you see my power and have my name published throughout all the earth. High-handed with my people still, you will not let them go.'* A great hail-storm was announced for the morrow, and, at the appointed time, Moses had scarcely

stretched out his hand towards heaven when hail stones fell in great numbers over the countryside, striking the crops and smashing the trees. Thunder rolled and rumbled. Moses had warned Pharaoh to put his cattle under shelter, and this he had ordered to be done. Some of his courtiers had followed suit, but others disregarded the warning, and their beasts were killed without mercy.

But if all the animals in Egypt had been previously slaughtered by the fifth plague how could there have been any left for this one? It may be an error due to failure to harmonize different accounts of the event, and in any case, the epic style of the narrative may well account for the inconsistency.

At all events, it was so unusual a happening that Pharaoh was frightened. He sent for Moses and Aaron and said: '*Yahweh is in the right; I and my subjects are in the wrong. Entreat Yahweh to stop the thunder and the hail, and I promise to let you go.*' This was a false promise; as soon as the storm was over, he retracted, *as Yahweh had foretold.*

### The eighth plague: the locusts (Exod. 10: 1–20).

As Moses had warned Pharaoh, these insects were to devour whatever had managed to survive the destruction produced by the hail.<sup>2</sup> This announcement of a fresh catastrophe began to be seriously disturbing to the high officials of the palace. The courtiers became nervous; why did Pharaoh refuse to let these people go? Let them depart, therefore, that they may worship Yahweh their God. For the East was only too well acquainted with locusts and dreaded them. They were a terrible scourge

<sup>2</sup> There is a curious detail to be noticed in passing. This eighth plague was to be the work of locusts. There must therefore have been something for them to eat . . . and destroy. A foreseeing editor has been careful to point out that the hail fell at a time when *the barley was in the ear and the flax budding*, whereas *the wheat and the spelt, being late crops, were not destroyed*. He was evidently a scribe thoroughly at home in the sequence of Egyptian agriculture. His details enable us to date this 'blow' early in February.

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

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and a synonym for the complete destruction of the crops and of the resulting famine. And so Pharaoh decided to make a deal with the Hebrews; he made arrangements for talks, and found out how many of them meant to go and offer sacrifice in the desert. They told him: '*We shall take our young men and our old men. We shall take our sons and daughters, our flocks and our herds, because for us it is the feast of Yahweh.*' He realized their cunning and saw that their real intention was to leave Egypt for good; and so he took care to lay it down that only the adult men might depart to the desert: the women and children were to stay behind as hostages. On these terms no understanding was possible. Meanwhile the locusts arrived. Thereupon Pharaoh begged Moses to get rid of them and in return he promised a quick deliverance. But as usual, once the scourge had ceased, he would not let them go.

**The ninth plague:** the darkness (Exod. 10: 21–29).

*Then Yahweh said to Moses: 'Stretch out your hand towards heaven, and let darkness, darkness so thick that it can be felt, cover the land of Egypt.' . . . And for three days there was deep darkness over the whole land of Egypt.* This was very probably due to the Rhamsin, a wind from the sandy desert, that carried with it clouds of fine dust, thick enough to act as a screen blocking the sunlight. The simoon and the sirocco could finally bring about widespread darkness by blowing to an enormous height a mass of sand which might come down in Sicily or even in southern Italy. There followed a further discussion on the composition of the caravan. Moses persisted in his demand that everyone should go, including the cattle. On the subject of the latter, he produced a subtle argument: until the last minute, he said, the Israelites would not know which animal they were to offer in sacrifice – would it be an ox, a lamb, a ram, a goat? None knew. Therefore they would have to

have all their beasts with them. But this time Pharaoh became furious. He was beginning to feel that he had had enough of these Semitic slaves who threatened him, brought disasters upon his nation, and dared to oppose him. '*Out of my sight!*' he shouted at Moses, '*Take care! Never appear before me again, for on the day you do, you die.*'

**The tenth plague** (Exod. 11). The last one. It ensured Israel's final deliverance.

At first the Egyptians had experienced only a rather trying series of events; the invasion of frogs, the clouds of mosquitoes and gadflies; the people on the whole were apathetic and had put up with these minor inconveniences without much protest. But Pharaoh's obstinacy had led to more dramatic blows, and their material interests were now threatened, first, by the sickness and death of farm animals and the destruction of the harvest by hail; and then by the locusts. Even so, Pharaoh still refused Moses' request.

Yahweh said to him: '*One disaster more I shall bring on Pharaoh and on Egypt, just one. . . . After this he will let you go.*' The climax was at hand, and the end of the drama in sight.

### History and the ten plagues. A parenthesis

There are a number of important points to notice about the ancient account of the plagues.

To begin with, there are contradictions in the narrative that demand an explanation. Then its epic character must be emphasized; and finally, a detailed judgement on its value as history must be attempted.

There are many contradictory statements, and these are numerous enough to be disturbing, at least at first sight. For instance, in the account of the first plague, Moses is said to have taken his staff, struck the Nile

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

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and turned its water into blood (Exod. 7: 17). In verse 19 it is Aaron who is said to have done this. A little further on, we are told that it was the water of the river that became red, but a few lines after this, in the same chapter, we learn that this phenomenon also extended to the marshes, canals and even to the contents of every tub or jar. Again, in the account of his declaration about the coming darkness (ninth plague), Moses tells Pharaoh that he will not visit him again. But this does not prevent him, in the following chapter, from arriving to tell the king that the tenth, the last and most deadly plague was on the way. There are many repetitions in the story, and these unfortunate contradictions. Is this due to editorial carelessness, loose thinking or lack of skill? In no way.

In the sixth century B.C. when the scribe responsible for this book wrote the chapter we are considering, he made use of various historical sources that were at his disposal. These 'traditions' or 'cycles' have been previously discussed several times. Here it is sufficient to repeat briefly that in order to write the account of the plagues, the author made use of three main documentary sources: the Yahwistic — probably committed to writing in the tenth century, during Solomon's reign; the Elohistic, slightly more recent than the former; and the Priestly, written after the return from Babylon about the middle of the seventh century B.C.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of combining the various materials into a single new and personal narrative as a modern historian would do, the sixth-century scribe took over whole phrases and even lengthy paragraphs from the manuscripts he was studying, and sometimes copied them word for word. All this was done without the least regard for repetitive

<sup>3</sup> Yahwistic: this cycle is so called because in it the author calls God Yahweh. The Elohistic calls him Elohim. The Priestly code was produced by the priests of the Temple in Jerusalem.

statements or bothering about the contradictions that might appear here and there in his compilation.

Modern Hebrew scholars have succeeded in identifying, isolating and labelling all the individual items that together make up this account. They have 'sounded', so to say, each phrase of the Hebrew text, analysing the syntax, setting apart the metaphors and the modes of expression personal to the author of each of these 'cycles', and so have been able to distinguish the origin of the main documentary sources used by the scribe in the construction of his work.

It will be obvious that these unedited texts are of inestimable value since they enable direct contact to be made with Israelite traditions of remote antiquity. The cost of this treasure may include some contradictions and some vagueness in detail. Does that matter? In any case, we should not be surprised to find that the three traditions record the 'ten' plagues differently: the Yahwistic author speaks of only seven 'blows', the Elohistic and the Priestly Code of only four. It is quite natural that as the centuries passed, the various human groups who preserved these 'cycles' should have attributed great importance to one episode, while neglecting another. It is, however, significant that all three cycles mention the tenth plague, the one in which the eldest son of every Egyptian family perished, and which finally decided Menepkah to let the Hebrews go. It was inevitable that the final editor should have included all ten plagues.

The modern reader may be shocked by this 'feast of magic' which began on Sinai (with Moses' staff turned into a serpent), was continued in Pharaoh's court (with Aaron's staff turned into a serpent too), and ended in an apocalyptic climax with the successive plagues that struck Egypt and its people.

At this point we should remember that we are still in

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

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the archaic period of Israel's story. But specialists in comparative literature have shown that in the remote and arduous origins of a great civilization, its primitive history takes an epic form: indeed, it is bound to take that form. Typical examples are: the Iliad, at the dawn of the Greek nation; the Song of Roland in France; the Scandinavian sagas, etc. They are always formed in the same way: on a theme whose authenticity is proclaimed with the utmost care (the Trojan war; the defeat of Charlemagne's rear-guard in the pass of Roncevaux; the expedition of the Norwegian drakkars in Greenland and America), and the popular imagination delights in decorating the life of the national hero with an infinity of wonderful traits. The modern historian has to re-establish the facts.

Does this mean that, in order to conform to the methods of these scholars, we must reduce the account of Moses' adventures in Egypt and his endless conversations with Pharaoh, to a profane and purely naturalistic status? We certainly must not exaggerate either way, not even slightly; and on this subject there is no reason why we should accept everything or deny everything. For that would make the alternative to be either the somewhat naïve ingenuity of past ages or mere desiccated scepticism. We dare not forget that the Bible is a living theological work whose aim is to recall the superb and formative dialogue between God and man. It is an essentially spiritual realm, from which it would be extremely difficult to eliminate the supernatural on *a priori* grounds.

### Practical conclusion

At this point in Israel's history God acted in a new way. This form of divine intervention was absolutely necessary in this desperate situation, if the People of God were to be saved.

Next, we notice that the Hebrew imagination reacting to these wonders – hard for an historian to define exactly – furnished a generous response. Century after century it gave thanks for them, for was it not through them that Yahweh had saved his people? The memory of them lay at the roots of Israel's faith and hope.

Finally we must certainly admit a progressive expansion in the account of these events. Moreover, their use in worship as well as their epic style needs to be taken into account. It is all this that ultimately gave us the complex document represented by this book.

### **Before the tenth plague: the Passover in Egypt**

Immediately preceding the further manifestation of Yahweh's power in a final and frightful way, the members of the Hebrew community in Egypt ate the Passover.

Yahweh had thought fit to let Moses and Aaron know the exact date when the tenth plague would be unleashed. The two prophets were told that this time Pharaoh would be compelled to give Israel its freedom. When that happened the journey must be begun without delay, together with the women and children, the cattle and the baggage. Preparations for departure must be considered, and a detailed timetable was provided.

Before striking camp there was to be a meal of a liturgical nature, eaten at night. Its every detail was determined by Moses, and every family had to obey his instructions implicitly. As early as the tenth abib<sup>4</sup> each group of Hebrews were to select a kid or a lamb, a male (Lev. 1: 3–22: 19), an animal without blemish (Lev. 21: 19, 21) and born during the year. Four days later, at the end of the afternoon of the fourteenth abib, and before

<sup>4</sup> The month of abib (the corn-month) was the sixth of the year. Later, on account of the institution of the Passover, it became the first of the twelve months. Israel's calendar was lunar, so it began with the new moon of the spring equinox.



Observe the mouth of Abib and celebrate the Passover for Yahweh your God, because it was in the mouth of Abib that Yahweh your God brought you out of Egypt by night . . . For seven days you must eat [the victim] with unleavened bread, the bread of emergency, for it was in great haste that you came out of the land of Egypt; so you will remember, all the days of your life, the day you came out of the land of Egypt.

Deut. 16: 1-3

sunset, this victim was to be slaughtered. With a branch of hyssop (a plant like marjoram, used as a sprinkler), previously steeped in the blood of the animal just slaughtered, the two doorposts supporting the entrance to the tent or the lintel of the dwelling, were to be marked. The purpose of this was to warn the 'Angel of Yahweh' to pass over and not to slay the firstborn in that place. But the Angel would enter the houses of the Egyptians, for these obviously would not have this sign outside, and slay their firstborn. Through this warning-note the Hebrew children would be spared.

Orientalists see in this red mark on the dwellings the defensive characteristic of blood which all Semites (even today the rite is strictly observed by some nomads of the Middle East) considered to be a means of keeping evil genii away. Ethnologists have discovered this custom in Africa and even in America.

The kid or lamb was to be roasted whole, with its head, feet and entrails. It was strictly forbidden for it to be boiled in water. All of it had to be eaten during the meal; this was to prevent anything left over being profaned by the polytheistic Egyptians after the Hebrews had gone. If there were not sufficient members in a family to dispose of the animal entirely, neighbours (fellow-believers, of course) were to be called in. Any scraps that might still remain were to be burnt on the hearth. The greatest care had to be taken not to burn any bone of the victim. This reveals an ancient pastoral and Semitic custom; in the spring the firstborn of the flock was sacrificed to the genie protecting the stock, and through this blood offering he was asked to secure the welfare of the animals. It was essential, therefore, not to provoke, by sympathetic magic, among the animals to be born later, those accidents which the shepherds dreaded: fractured feet.

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

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Christian commentators have pointed out a very moving harmony. When Christ, the Christian paschal lamb, came to die on the cross, not a limb, not a bone was broken. This was directly contrary to the traditional method of punishment. For, normally, the condemned man, nailed to the cross by his hands and feet, died, not as is generally believed, from a heavy loss of blood, but from asphyxia. His arms were stretched out and his lungs were blocked. From time to time, in order to breathe, he lifted his body, at the cost of fearful pain, by supporting himself on his nailed feet. After being exposed for three hours, a Roman soldier, in charge of the execution, using his spear as a club, would break his legs in order to shorten the agony. Death from suffocation soon followed. In the Gospel, however, we read that a guard, in accordance with the regulations, broke the legs of the two thieves being crucified on either side of Jesus, but when he reached Jesus he found him dead, and so did not strike him, but simply pierced his heart with his spear, and water poured out. Thus on Calvary, the 'Lamb of God' had no bone broken, just as the Law of Moses decreed for the sacrifice of the lamb on the fourteenth abib, a rule based doubtless on an age-old custom of the Semitic shepherds.

Returning to the meal in the night, we find that the lamb of the Hebrews had to be eaten with bitter herbs whose sharp taste was to recall in later times the bitter bondage in Egypt. Scripture does not tell us what plants these were; they are described in rabbinic tradition, though they must have varied at different times and places. It is generally agreed that they were mainly chicory, endive and cress, and probably parsley as well.

The bread to be eaten with the roasted meat was to be made without leaven (yeast). Although the date for departure had been already settled (the sacrificial lamb

was selected four days before it), this unleavened bread was meant to suggest sudden and extreme haste, the haste of a housewife with no time to let the bread rise. The people who ate would have to be content with flour mixed with a little water, and quickly baked.

The rite had an additional purpose. Symbolically, yeast contained the principle of its own corruption, and the Israelites were forbidden to offer fermented bread on God's altar, except in the case of peace offerings and during the feast 'of Weeks', that is, Pentecost.

There was one other peculiarity about this meal. It was the custom in the East for a man to eat, squatting like a tailor, before a coloured skin placed on the floor, around which the family gathered. The dish was put in the middle and all took the food from it with their hands. But on this Passover night a very different attitude was adopted. Everyone stood, their long tunic gathered round their loins and fastened with a belt. With their sandals on their feet, and staffs in hand they were travellers, ready to start the moment the signal was given.

The tents and houses were shut. No Hebrew was to wander about outside. Every family was to assemble for the sacred meal. '*You shall eat it hastily,*' Yahweh told Moses, '*it is a Passover in honour of Yahweh.*'

### **The Tenth and last Plague (Exod. 11:12–12:29–33).**

While the Hebrews were eating this meal in silence and trembling, Yahweh had unleashed the tenth liberating plague over Egypt, the one recorded by all three traditions. During this night of fear, says the Hebrew author of this epic, the firstborn of every Egyptian family died without apparent cause. *There was a great cry, for there was not a house without its dead.* Pharaoh's son, the future successor to the throne, was not spared, any more than *the prisoner in his dungeon.* This time the trial was

## The Ten Plagues of Egypt

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overwhelming. Pharaoh did not wait for dawn before summoning Moses to the palace; he said to him: '*Get up you and the sons of Israel, and get away from my people. Go and offer worship to Yahweh as you have asked. . . . Take your flocks and herds and go.*'

Throughout the Delta in mourning a *great cry* arose. Women in the East, when a near relation dies, howl as a sign of their grief. It is understandable that in the situation in Egypt the people would have clamoured for the immediate departure of the Hebrews. Everything was ready for the road. When he left the palace, Moses, therefore, had only one command to give, and straightaway, even before dawn, the people were on the move. The captivity in Egypt was over. The exodus had begun, and the climax of the epic had been reached.

## ISRAEL COMES OUT OF EGYPT (ABOUT 1220 B.C.)

Genesis gives full details of the number of Hebrew emigrants who came into the Delta in company with Joseph and later with Jacob. There were seventy, not, of course, including women and young children, servants and slaves (Gen. 46: 26-27). Seventy, in fact, is a reasonable number for a medium-sized clan.

After four centuries in Goshen, the Hebrews left Egypt. According to Exodus there were six hundred thousand men, as well as their families. On this basis, it has been estimated that the total population of Hebrews in the Delta must have been two million. This is unlikely. In the first century B.C. all Egypt numbered only seven hundred thousand. It should be noticed, too, that the column of emigrants is said to have crossed the arm of the sea (called the Sea of Reeds in the Bible) in a single night; an impossibility for two million people. Such a multitude would, in any case, have covered twice the distance between the Delta and Sinai! Clearly the numbers given by those reporting them, and perhaps even by the scribes, have been increased so as to fit in with the epic style of the narrative. A cautious estimate might say that it was two to three thousand nomads who set out, and this in itself was a considerable number.

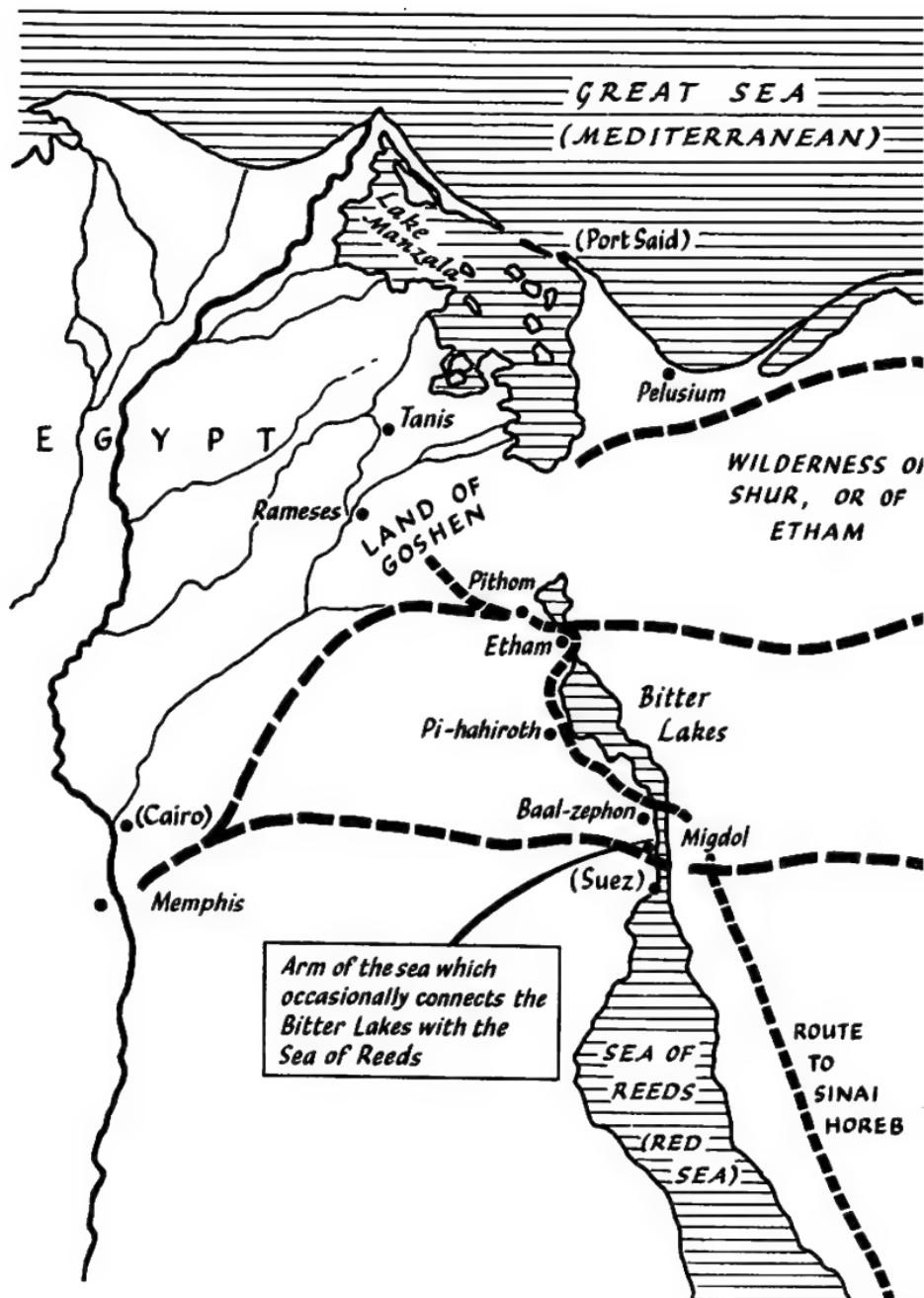
The Hebrews were joined by *people of various sorts . . . in great numbers* (Exod. 12: 38). Numbers mentions a 'rabble'. These may have been slaves and prisoners of war who had been forced to make bricks, with probably some Asiatics left behind after the Hyksos invasion, Edomites, Midianites, etc. These disparate elements, always on the point of rebellion and criticism, were to prove a heavy burden to Moses whenever some difficulty or trial occurred.

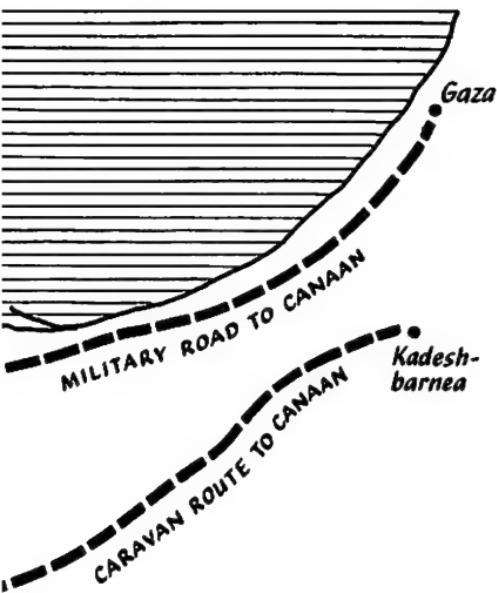
On their journey they carried the unleavened flour under their cloaks in meal tubs: and a more weighty burden – Joseph's bones in a coffin shaped in Egyptian fashion. Their great ancestor's wishes had to be respected. Before he died he had told them, solemnly: '*It is sure that God will visit you and when that day comes you must take my bones from here with you*' (Exod. 13: 19). Joseph's bones were to wander with the Hebrews during their 'forty years' journey in the region of Sinai. As soon as they reached Canaan they were anxious to bury them, and the burial took place at Shechem.

Camp was struck: the caravan set out.

### The Israelites seek a way out

What route was followed by the Israelites? Egyptologists have studied this problem closely. Recent studies seem to have shown that in fact there was not one Exodus but three: 1. the northern route, towards Palestine (marked on the map as the route of the armies): 2. the central route, starting from Etham towards Palestine (marked on the map as the caravan route): 3. the southern route, west of the Bitter Lakes, and leading to Sinai: this was the caravan route of the Arab merchants. A short examination of these theories is here followed by a suggested solution of the problem.





## WILDERNESS OF PARAN



## THE ISRAELITES' PROBABLE ROUTE

Leaving Qantir (to the south of Pi-Rameses) the column of Hebrews set out under Moses' leadership.

It did not take the northern route, that is, the route taken by the armies into Canaan dominated by Sileh (el-Kantara). The column turned towards Etham (probably to take the caravan route). At Etham it wheeled round, but we do not know for what reason.

By way of Pi-hahiroth it went down the western shore of the Bitter Lakes. The column crossed the series of marshes (dried up by the east wind) at the southern end of the Bitter Lakes, forming a sort of corridor intermittently covered by the Red Sea.

### **1. The first route**, called that of 'the armies'. It follows the Mediterranean coast-line up to Gaza.

There is general agreement nowadays that the migration started at Qantir, south of Tanis. In principle, the northern route, from Sileh, or the modern el-Kantara, below Lake Manzala, it seems, would be the one naturally indicated. In practice, it would have been disastrous. Recent excavations have shown that this region bristled with Egyptian fortresses erected to protect the Delta against the Asiatic invaders. The Hebrews, coming out of the Nile valley would have come up against this closely linked barrier. The Bible adds that it was also the direct way to Philistine territory, though in fact, the Philistines were not yet in occupation, and Semitic tribes held strongly fortified positions there. The Bible is careful to tell us that the Hebrews did not travel along the route leading to the Philistines, and it offers a theological explanation: God said that as the result of the inevitable battles, the people would change their minds and turn back to Egypt.

### **2. The second route**; from Etham in the far north of the Bitter Lakes. It was a commercial highway, the caravan route, to Canaan by way of Kadesh, the opulent oasis in the desert of Paran. This raises a fresh problem.

The meeting place for the general departure is undisputed: it was Qantir, north of the Wadi Tumilat for them all. The Bible indicates that the Hebrews began their journey from the south-east; they crossed the slopes of Goshen and by way of Succoth (the Tents), marched on Etham, the start of the caravan route to Kadesh. The road to freedom was open; they had only to cross the ford through that narrow marshy stretch (now widened by the Suez Canal) that had once connected the Mediterranean with the Red Sea. The Bible suggests that the Hebrews

advanced north-east of Etham so as to take the caravan route through Kadesh and Beersheba, straight into Canaan.

But at this point matters become complicated. What really happened? We know at least the previous order was countermanded: '*Tell the sons of Israel to turn back and pitch camp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, facing Baal-zephon*' (Exod. 14: 1). Obviously something unforeseen had occurred, it may have been a foiled attack against an Egyptian outpost. Etham means a high wall and also a rampart.

At any rate there was a complete reversal of direction. They had been going east and then north-east. But now they turned south along the route following the shore of the Bitter Lakes. This was still in Egyptian territory.

It is possible – and a number of scholars hold this view – that some tribes, detached from the main body, may have been able to penetrate the line of defence unobserved, and move on towards Kadesh, where we find them a little later.

This being so, can we call this an Exodus in the strict sense? For these must have formed only a small contingent. The main body, led by Moses now moved south along the third route, the traditional direction of the Exodus.

### **The third route: from Etham to Migdol.**

It was Yahweh who, through Moses, his envoy, was leading the Israelites. At every turn the Bible emphasizes this intervention of Providence. During the day, he went before them in the form of cloud, and during the night as a pillar of fire, to show them the way. It reminds one forcibly of the sandstorms that now and then swept through the desert like some mysterious force that seemed almost alive. The Arab drivers mutter: 'It is a djinn who is passing by.'

Fr F. M. Abel, O.P., one of the most eminent scholars of the Biblical School in Jerusalem, a historian and an archaeologist, examined, on the spot, the various hypotheses as to the route taken by Moses, and in the light of the information given by Scripture and of the geographical possibilities, worked out his own solution which is here followed.

Starting from Qantir in mid-Goshen, in two successive bodies, they stopped first at Etham. There followed a strange and sudden change of course towards the south, and they camped in front of Pi-hahiroth between Migdol and the sea, facing Baal-zephon (Exod. 14: 1-3). Speaking through Moses, Yahweh told them: *'You are to pitch your camp opposite this place, beside the sea.'*

It is difficult to identify the places mentioned in the Bible, especially as some of the names it gives are simply descriptive. Migdol, for instance, is an Egyptian word for fortifications; Pi-hahiroth means the house on the marshes, or beside the marshes; Baal-zephon recalls a Canaanite god, the baal of the north, who may have been worshipped in very different places. All of this makes the historian's task very difficult. There is no room here to discuss all the theories put forward. Here Fr Abel's position – summarised by Fr Grollenberg of the same School, in his *Atlas of the Bible* – is accepted; in this view Migdol (a fortress) may well have been in the far south of the Bitter Lakes in order to protect the fords; Etham (a rampart) was built for the same reason in the far north of this group of lakes; and Baal-zephon was slightly south-west of Migdol. There were others in the north.

Scripture speaks of the camp being set up by the sea-side. Unfortunately Hebrew has a very limited vocabulary and has only one word to express both sea and lake.

At this remote period the Hebrews around Migdol lived, in fact, close to an arm of the Red Sea (or Sea of

Reeds). The gulf of Suez, which then went further inland than today, reached as far as the Bitter Lakes and ended there, though it was only intermittently, at some seasons or as the result of certain tides, that it penetrated so far.

This natural waterway ran for nearly forty miles, and is now included in the Suez Canal. Its course was ill-defined, marshy and intersected by fords. At times it was dry, at others it became a bay, and occasionally it was just an arm of the sea that could not be crossed. It was only late in the Christian era that a 'bar' was formed, more or less isolating the Red Sea from the sheet of water called the Bitter Lakes. But as late as 1860, Linant Bey recorded that during an equinoctial tide the Red Sea had pushed forward about ten miles towards the Lakes. Today the Red Sea and the Bitter Lakes are joined by the Suez Canal.

The Hebrews thus arrived at this 'sea', as it is called by the Bible, but which was really an arm of the sea, a channel of salt water, a few hundred yards wide at most. How to cross it was a problem. Moses seems to have known the way perfectly; he had taken it as an exile to Midian, and on his return. The Hebrews prepared to cross by the traditional ford leading, on the Asiatic side, to the caravan route to Arabia by way of Sinai.

### A fresh drama (Exod. 14: 5–14)

But once again drama intervened. The Bible records that Pharaoh began to repent of the hasty liberation of his labour-force. '*What have we done,*' his courtiers asked, '*allowing Israel to leave our service?*' Straightaway the chariots were harnessed – these were war-machines with two fast horses each – and the fugitives pursued.

When the Hebrew camp saw this 'armoured division' coming upon them at the gallop, they at once sounded the alarm. Terror rang out from the tents. As soon as events

looked ugly, the Israelites turned to Moses with insults and cursing: '*Were there no graves in Egypt that you must lead us out to die in the wilderness?*' Their voices continued, full of hate and threatening: '*What good have you done us, bringing us out of Egypt? Leave us alone. We would rather work for the Egyptians. Better to work for them than die in the wilderness!*'

Moses answered the rioters: '*Yahweh will do the fighting for you.*'

### The miraculous crossing of the Red Sea

But how, in fact, was this multitude, practically unarmed and essentially vulnerable, to be saved from the attack of these armoured chariots? Hope seemed gone, and the Exodus looked like being a catastrophe from the start.

The famous miracle then occurred: the Sea of Reeds was crossed dryshod. This is the traditional account of its main features: *Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. Yahweh drove back the sea with a strong easterly wind all night, and he made dry land of the sea. The waters parted and the sons of Israel went on dry ground right into the sea, walls of water to right and to left of them.* Soon, the column of emigrants had wholly passed over to the Asiatic bank. Then, *in the morning watch* (between two and six o'clock in the morning), the Egyptians decided to attack the Hebrews. Thereupon, Moses again stretched out his hand; at once the sea returned to its bed, and covered Pharaoh's chariots. *Not a single one of them was left. . . . That day Yahweh rescued Israel from the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore, and the people venerated Yahweh; they put their faith in Yahweh and in Moses, his servant.*

There is no difficulty in interpreting this chapter as historical, but written as an epic. Even the non-specialist reader will easily recognize the two juxtaposed traditions:

to begin with, the sea 'driven back with a strong easterly wind all night' (Yahwistic cycle) is mentioned; and a few lines lower down there is a more spectacular account of the division of the water into two walls on either side of the improvised path-way (Priestly cycle). It is clear that this miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds has been told and retold during the centuries, embellished by the popular imagination and amplified. This episode is among the strangest and most moving in Israel's history. It was carefully recorded in Jewish chronicles, in Christian tradition, and even among Mohammedans.

It was inevitable that the biblical account should have been strongly attacked in the rationalist quarters at the end of the last century. Today believers, while agreeing that, in the circumstances, natural phenomena may have been made use of by God, admit that from the literary point of view the account is mingled with 'epic' tradition, but can be disentangled from it.

### **An explanation of the crossing of the Red Sea**

There is no need to rationalize this famous story in the Bible, nor is there any intention of doing so here. But a more thorough investigation, enlisting the help of modern scientific knowledge, is certainly not out of place.

It is worthwhile recalling that at Migdol in the time of Moses there was a real extension of the Sea of Reeds (the Egyptian name of the Red Sea) in existence, so that it was quite correct to speak of 'the crossing of the Red Sea'. But this arm was very narrow and usually dry, or at least reduced to a series of inter-connected marshes, flooded by certain tides. Before the excavation of the Suez Canal there was the bed of a gulf that was filled at intervals. These quagmires were frequently dried out by a strong east wind (as the Bible observes). This was the

fearsome sirocco, blowing up from the desert and drying up all the moisture from the earth and sky. The fortress of Migdol had been built at this precise point on the southern end of the Bitter Lakes to keep watch on the ford, the starting point of the caravan route for Asia. Moses obviously knew all these places.

There is no need to deny the historical authenticity of the story, and therefore to exclude the possibility of the 'strong east wind' being providential. It dried up the marshes and enabled a guide with some knowledge of the route to take advantage of the situation and lead the Hebrews dryshod over at least some of the fords. In early morning, the wind slackened, the sea came back over the marshes, and the Egyptian chariots which were just too late in pursuing the Israelites, could not escape being engulfed. It was by no means unusual for these unwieldy machines with their heavy wheels to suffer serious accidents.

Probably the affair would not have much impressed the Egyptian authorities, and there is no record of it in their chronicles. They had wanted to recapture for forced labour a small body of Canaanite nomads escaping to Asia and had dispatched a military detachment after them for the purpose, but at the ford at Migdol it was caught by the rising tide, with the loss of some of the chariots and drivers. For the Egyptians it was merely a frontier incident. But for the Hebrews it was one of the most amazing and important events of their history. *Israel witnessed the great act that Yahweh had performed against the Egyptians, and the people venerated Yahweh; they put their faith in Yahweh and in Moses, his servant.*

### The Dancing song of Miriam, Moses' sister

Moses had been cursed by the people, but now songs of joy and victory broke out. There had been many vicissi-

## Israel Comes Out of Egypt (about 1220 B.C.)

tudes, but at last Jacob's sons were really free of Egypt, and they raised a song of thanksgiving to Yahweh. It is a kind of spontaneous *Te Deum* chanted by *Moses and the sons of Israel* and on account of its noble imagery and style, its Godward movement, its almost 'romantic' nature, deserves a place in an anthology of the great poetry of the Old Testament:

*The chariots and the army of Pharaoh he has hurled  
into the sea;*

*the pick of his horsemen lie drowned in the Sea of  
Reeds.*

*The depths have closed over them;*

*they have sunk to the bottom like a stone . . .*

*A blast from your nostrils<sup>1</sup> and the waters piled high;  
the waves stood upright like a dyke;*

*in the heart of the sea the deeps came together;*

*'I will give chase and overtake', the enemy said,*

*'I shall share out the spoil, my soul will feast on it;*

*I shall draw my sword, my hand will destroy them.'*

*One breath of yours you blew, and the sea closed over  
them;*

*they sank like lead in the terrible waters.*

*Who among the gods is your like, Yahweh?*

*Who is your like, majestic in holiness,*

*terrible in deeds of prowess, worker of wonders? . . .*

*You will bring them (the Israelites) and plant them  
on the mountain<sup>2</sup> that is your own, the place you have  
made your dwelling,<sup>3</sup> Yahweh,*

*the sanctuary, Yahweh, prepared by your own hands.*

*Yahweh will be king for ever and ever.*

<sup>1</sup> A poetic anthropomorphism. In those ancient times the wind was regarded as 'the breath of God', his spirit, the creative life force.

<sup>2</sup> The mountain is Canaan. The pasturelands are to be found in the mountain region.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to the future Temple of Jerusalem which was built by Solomon (967 B.C.).



Yahweh I sing: he has covered himself in glory,  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.  
Yah is my strength, my song,  
he is my salvation.

This is my God, I praise him . . .

Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took up the timbrel, and all  
the women followed her with timbrels, dancing. And Miriam led  
them in the refrain:

'Sing of Yahweh: he has covered himself in glory,  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea'.

Exod. 15

## Israel Comes Out of Egypt (about 1220 B.C.)

Biblical scholars have long suggested that the literary perfection of this song is unlikely to have originated among a still primitive people so soon after the crossing of the Red Sea, and have concluded that it must have been composed at a later date. In the time of Moses, for instance, horsemen were unknown in tactical warfare; horses were used simply to draw chariots. Cavalry appear only very much later; they could not therefore have been drowned at the crossing of the Red Sea. Again, the poem mentions Edom and Moab, two tribes which opposed Israel's entry into Canaan forty years later. This prophetic detail somewhat strains belief.

The most probable truth is that some archaic elements have been retained in the later edition of the poem, given in the Bible. Stylistic evidence proves this. At the same time, it is scarcely credible that this chant of victory, poetically and spiritually akin to a psalm, should have first appeared in the developed literary form that we find here.

We may think of an actual scene, common among Bedouins of today and yesterday. When a victory is proclaimed, or warriors come home, or some social or religious event of general interest is to be celebrated, the women are chosen to express the tribal joy in song and dance with accompanying music — all closely associated for the occasion.

It is possible that this song of the Red Sea, traditionally called 'the song of Moses' or 'the song of Miriam' can in fact be reduced to the two concluding lines of the chapter:

*Sing of Yahweh: he has covered himself in glory,  
horse and driver he has thrown into the sea.*

## **Moses and Joshua, Founders of the Nation**

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**Thus, without great difficulty, Israel had succeeded in leaving the House of Bondage for good, and Moses at once began to lead his people along the caravan route to Sinai.**

## 6

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### EN ROUTE FOR SINAI (ABOUT 1220 B.C.)

From the frontiers of Migdol to the Horeb-Sinai range is nearly two hundred miles, taking into account the many inevitable detours made by a caravan.

#### **Forty years in the wilderness of Sinai**

Exodus sets out to relate the principal adventures which took place during these 'forty years' spent in the 'desert'.

Forty years: this eastern form of expression has already been explained; it is symbolic rather than numerical. In general the number forty in the Bible means 'a rather long period'. Here it could be taken for the length of a generation, though even that is rather vague (twenty-five, thirty years?).

The desert of Sinai: here both a geographical and an historical error must be avoided; it would be wrong to think of the desert or wilderness of Sinai as like the Sahara desert. The Israelites moved from pasture to pasture in wild and waste land certainly; yet although the ground was poor their undemanding flocks found sufficient to eat.

#### **The stages of the journey to Sinai**

From the Sea of Reeds the column plunged into the wilderness of Etham, sometimes called Shur. The first



They reached Marah but the water there was so bitter they could not drink it; that is why the place was named Marah. The people grumbled at Moses. 'What are we to drink?' they said. So Moses appealed to Yahweh, and Yahweh pointed out some wood to him; this Moses threw into the water, and the water was sweetened.

So they came to Elim where twelve water-springs were, and seventy palm trees; and there they pitched their camp beside the water.

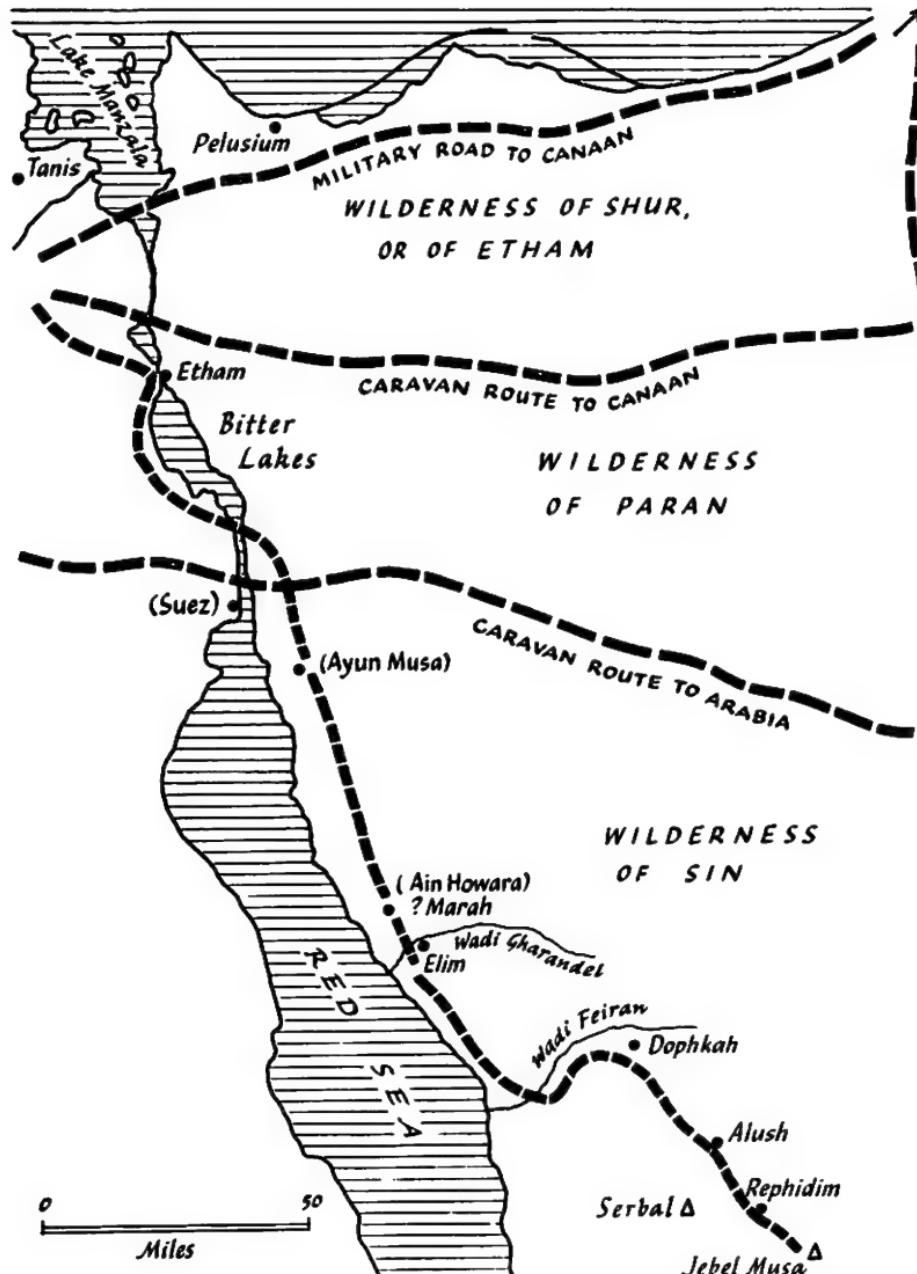
Exod. 15: 22-25, 27

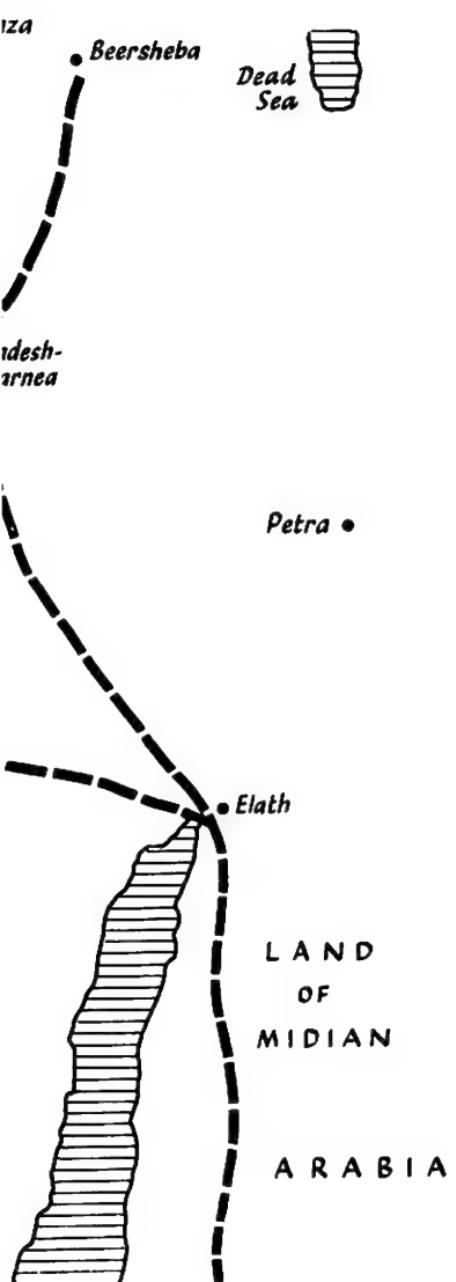
stage was Marah. For three days they travelled across the wilderness of Etham, a barren, bleak and desolate plain, without being able to water their flocks at an oasis. Marah has been identified with the place called the Spring of Moses (*Ain Musa*); some biblical scholars prefer to locate the camp at *Ain Howara* a little lower down, where briny springs are to be found. There was general discontent among the people who *grumbled at Moses*. '*What are we to drink?*' they said. Moses threw into the water a kind of wood which, it appears, sweetened the salt water, or, at least, made it more or less drinkable; some travellers think that it was branches of barberry.

The second stage was Elim, which with some probability has been identified with the luxuriant oasis of the Wadi Gharandel, *where twelve water-springs were*, Exodus points out, *and seventy palm trees*. It was a dreamland after the tiring journeys of the previous days.

The Book of Numbers states that the Israelites left Elim and encamped by the Sea of Reeds (Numb. 33: 10). Then, still for geographical reasons, they penetrated into the wilderness of Sin. It was a month since they had left Egypt. Soon travelling grew hard and exhausting. The unruly among them took advantage of this to complain bitterly of the two leaders who had led the Israelites into this rash expedition. *And the whole community of the sons of Israel began to complain against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and said to them, 'Why did we not die at Yahweh's hand in the land of Egypt, when we were able to sit down to pans of meat and could eat bread to our heart's content? As it is, you have brought us to this wilderness [of Sin] to starve this whole company to death!'*

That evening the camp was covered with a flight of quails. Ornithologists tell us that at the beginning of spring (and this was the season when the event occurred)





## ISRAEL'S JOURNEY TO SINAI

After the passage of the Red Sea, the column of Israelites set out for Sinai.

*1st stage.* Marah. Ain Musa (Spring of Moses) or perhaps Ain Howara. At all events the caravan journeyed for three days without having water available.

*2nd stage.* Elim and its oasis with twelve springs and seventy palm trees in the Wadi Gharandel.

*3rd stage.* On the shores of the Red Sea. The place has not been identified.

*Following stages.* Crossing the fearful desert of Sin: Dophkah and Alush.

*Rephidim.* Battle with the Amalekites.

Arrival at the foot of Jebel Musa (Sinai-Horeb). Establishment of the camp. They stayed there about a year. Important events: the Ten Commandments, the Covenant, the golden calf, the renewal of the Covenant.

large flights of quail, after wintering in Africa, return to Europe and pass in great numbers over the Sinai peninsula. It often happens that exhausted by their efforts whole flocks of these birds come down to the ground for a night to get their second wind and leave the next day at dawn for the north. The Israelites were amply provided with this providential meat.

And they also needed bread, which was the basic food of nomads. The discontented among them began to complain. '*I will rain down bread for you from the heavens,*' Yahweh had told Moses. Indeed the next morning (the morning after the arrival of the quail) there was a coating of dew all around the camp. *When the coating of dew lifted, there on the surface of the desert was a thing delicate, powdery, as fine as hoarfrost on the ground.* It was the famous manna of the desert. In another verse the writer explains that this manna was like coriander seed, an umbilliferous aromatic plant which is plentiful in the wilderness of Sinai. *It was white and its taste was like that of wafers made with honey.* The writer of the Book of Numbers compares the manna to bdellium, a transparent and aromatic resin produced by a kind of palm tree (Numb. 11: 7). Botanists have thought that it might possibly have been an exudation associated with another tree, the *tamaris mannifera*, but the proposed identification is by no means certain.

After gathering the manna the people ground it in a mill or crushed it with a pestle; it was cooked in a pot or made into bread.

*The sons of Israel ate manna for forty years, up to the time they reached inhabited country: they ate manna up to the time they reached the frontier of the land of Canaan.* It should be added, since we are here dealing with the history of Israelite civilization, that during these 'forty years' in the wilderness the Israelites, who quickly be-

came once again nomad shepherds, lived by leading their flocks from pasture to pasture over the steppe. Some groups seem to have settled temporarily near an oasis where they grew a small amount of cereals. In the camps set up on the Horeb massif, they continued, as in the past, to drink milk and to eat curds; in addition to manna they had also bread, vegetables and even on occasion, a kid or a lamb. It should not be thought, indeed, that their pastoral life 'in the wilderness of Sin' was more arduous than that of the patriarchs, at least when the latter were wandering about in the neighbourhood of Beersheba and in the Negeb.

The Book of Numbers in the list which it gives of the halting places in the wilderness mentions two which do not occur in Exodus: these are Dophkah and Alush. Dhorme, a well-known biblical scholar, sees a connection between the place-name Dophkah and the Egyptian word *mafkat* (turquoise) which would give grounds for locating it at Serabit el-Khadim, to which from time to time the Pharaohs sent teams of miners to extract the precious stones which are numerous in this part of the mountain range.

The Israelites then went straight on to Alush. It must have been a difficult journey, cutting diagonally across the greater part of the wilderness of Sin. They camped now right at the centre of the mountain mass.

The next stage brought them to Rephidim (probably Wadi Refayid, to the north-west of Jebel Musa) an immense plain surrounded by mountain peaks of curious shape. Here the Wadi Feiran and Wadi Aleyat unite; in the rainy season these irrigate this very varied region.

Unfortunately, when the caravan reached Rephidim, the springs at which they had counted on watering their flocks after the arduous journey across the wilderness of Sin, had dried up. '*Give us water to drink,*' shouted the

men, and as their leader called on them not to put Yahweh to the test once again, they resorted to insults and to threats. '*Why did you bring us out of Egypt?*' they asked. '*Was it so that we should die of thirst, with our children and our cattle?*' Moses then appealed to Yahweh, informing him of the situation. '*How am I to deal with this people?*' he asked. '*A little more and they will stone me!*' On Yahweh's orders Moses struck the rock and water gushed out.

They were not yet completely out of danger. A group of Amalekites, warlike Canaanite nomads, who normally settled in the north of the peninsula but preyed on the caravans throughout its whole length, thought that the moment had come to attack the column of fleeing Israelites. They foresaw a profitable raid. At the end of the day the throng of assailants appeared in the distance: there was no longer any doubt; the attack was to take place the next day.

Moses was not a war leader; he never took part, effectively at least, in the various battles that the Israelites fought on their interminable way to the Promised Land. Moses' role was quite different. Among the young warriors, all full of spirit, whom he had noticed on the recent stages of the journey, was a man of the tribe of Ephraim, later to be known by the name of Joshua, the son of Nun; at this time he was called Hoshea (salvation); later, at Kadesh, Moses changed this primitive name into Jehoshua — of which we have made Joshua — that is, 'Yahweh is my salvation'.

On the eve of the battle, Moses said to Joshua: '*Pick out men for yourself, and tomorrow morning march out to engage Amalek.<sup>1</sup> I, meanwhile, will stand on the*

<sup>1</sup> Amalek: the Amalekite tribe is designated here under the name of its eponymous ancestor. Biblical scholars think that Amalek was the grandson of Esau — that is, the son of Eliphaz by Timna the Horite.

*hilltop, the staff of God in my hand.'* All the time that Joshua (he is here given his name in its final form by anticipation) was engaged in battle in the valley, Moses from his lofty observation post, was following the vicissitudes of the struggle. To implore the help and protection of Yahweh he held his arms raised up to heaven. And so long as Moses had his hands raised up to God the advantage was with Israel and Joshua cut his enemies in pieces; but when Moses grew weary and let his arms drop the advantage then went to the Amalekites. Aaron and Hur, who had accompanied Moses to the mountain, at once realized what had happened; they hastened to seat Moses on a large stone and held up his arms as before. This scene has traditionally been interpreted as an illustration of the efficacy of prayer. Soon Joshua had put the Amalekite hordes to flight. At this place Moses built an altar which was given the name of Yahweh-nissi ('Yahweh is my banner'), and here the interview with Jethro occurred.

At that time, very probably, the Midianite chieftain's camp was in the pastureland near the Horeb massif. News travelled fast on the steppes. On receiving news of Israel's presence in the region Jethro made his way to the Hebrew camp. He brought his son-in-law's wife, Zipporah, and her two sons. There were the usual ceremonial greetings and congratulations; Moses showed marked deference towards his father-in-law. Jethro, a man of certain age and experience, had serious criticisms to offer about Moses' system of administering justice. '*It is not right,*' he said, '*to take all this on yourself.*' And he suggested reforms.

From the strictly social sphere we pass at once to the religious. *Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, offered a holocaust and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with*

- *all the elders of Israel to share the meal with the father-in-law of Moses in the presence of God.*

Some historians have reasoned as follows on the basis of this text. Moses, Aaron his brother and the elders were present at the sacrifice and sacred meal offered by the 'priest' Jethro. We know enough of the Israelite leaders to be sure that they would have categorically refused to be present at an idolatrous sacrifice. Quite obviously, then, Jethro must have sacrificed to Yahweh. It appears, therefore, that Yahweh was a Midianite God. Moses must have obtained knowledge of the divine existence of Yahweh during his stay at Midian. Subsequently this same Yahweh spoke to him in the Burning Bush of Sinai when he was watching Jethro's sheep. On his return to Egypt Moses revealed to bene-Israel the existence and power of this God who intended to deliver them from their slavery. Moses, returning to the land of Goshen from exile, was able in the end to persuade the sons of Jacob to accept the protection of this God who desired to adopt them as his children. Thus everything appears to be explained: Moses, Aaron and the elders had no reason to refuse to take part, with Jethro as the sacrificing priest, in a Yahwistic rite.

Despite the logic of this reasoning the thesis may be questioned. In the first place, it may well be that Jethro, Abraham's grandson by the concubine Keturah, kept a more or less attenuated religious tradition about the existence of the God of the patriarchs. On the other hand, it is difficult to accept that the Israelites of the land of Goshen, who remained always attached to the promises of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, had deliberately abandoned their tribal religion to follow another god whom hitherto they had not known. The extraordinary social and religious revolution carried out by Moses is inconceivable if it was effected in the name

## **En Route for Sinai (about 1220 B.C.)**

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of a deity whose existence had not even been suspected. Finally, there is the close relationship, which was shortly to emerge, between the spirit of the two Covenants – the Covenant granted to Abraham under the Oak of Mamre and the Covenant that very shortly was to be formulated before the people on Sinai.

Soon after these incidents indeed they arrived at Sinai. The way is fairly short between Rephidim and Horeb.

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## THE COVENANT ON SINAI

To the south of the Sinai peninsula, which tapers off like an arrowhead towards the Red Sea, stands a mountain range of savage beauty; a forest of peaks spreads out against the intense blue of the sky with all the clarity of an etching. Which exactly of these peaks is the Sinai of the Bible? Geographers and historians have long argued the point. This rocky citadel sends out a series of spurs towards the gulf of Suez with Jebel Serbal (6769 feet). In the centre, standing back slightly to the south, stands the rose-coloured mountain Jebel Musa (the mountain of Moses) whose summit reaches 7449 feet. To the south-west is the highest point of the range, Jebel Katerin (8600 feet). In the present state of the question there is almost general agreement in regarding Jebel Musa as the mountain on which Yahweh granted to his Chosen People the sacred pact which the Bible calls the Covenant.

### **The Covenant of Sinai: the Covenants of the Bible**

With the Covenant of Sinai we come to a fundamental chapter of biblical history. It should be added here that in the great Semitic family every personal or social commitment of a certain importance had to take a ritual form, an oath before the altar, the exchange of garments

## The Covenant on Sinai

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or a sacrifice followed by a meal taken in common in which the use of salt was obligatory.

In the Old as in the New Testament when God revealed his plan to his creature he marked his intervention by the establishment of a Covenant. Thus in what might be called the prehistoric period of the spiritual adventure of humanity we can already find the conclusion of two covenants. At the beginning there was a sort of covenant with Adam, but the first human couple broke the law; later, at the Flood<sup>1</sup> there is a kind of second covenant between God and Noah; subsequently the result was disappointing. Nevertheless, the promises made by God remained.

With Abraham we come into the historical period of the history of salvation. In the course of this long period of evolution, which this time went on continuously, three stages can be distinguished, or, three Covenants, each of them heralding and conditioning fresh starting points at the religious and spiritual level. The first Covenant was between Yahweh and Abraham. The second took place on Sinai. The third was instituted by Christ, on the day before he suffered, at the Last Supper; he uttered the sacramental words: '*This cup [which he had just filled with wine] is the new covenant in my blood which will be poured out for you.*'

### The three phases of Sinai

Before we start on the events which took place on Sinai it is important to have a clear idea of the general plan of the events which took place sometimes at the foot and sometimes on the slopes of Sinai. The following three phases can be distinguished:

1. The Covenant of Yahweh with his people. Central to

<sup>1</sup>In *Abraham*, the first volume of this series, at pp. 134ff, I have explained these biblical stories in the light of Babylonian traditions.

this is the Decalogue, which originated with the Elohistic tradition; hence the high moral tone of these passages. It forms Israel's charter and is illustrated by a commentary that shows how the Decalogue is to be applied by the people in their lives (the Book of the Covenant).

2. Breaking of the Covenant, Israel's apostasy, the Golden Calf. During a time of aberration Israel represented Yahweh the Almighty in the form of a golden calf. It was not in this instance idolatry, strictly speaking, but an infraction of the second commandment. The punishment for it was terrible but indispensable; the people had to understand that the majesty and will of Yahweh allowed no compromise.

3. The code of the renewal of the Covenant. Moses intervened with Yahweh who finally consented to grant his forgiveness. Yahweh then drew up the second Decalogue (Yahwistic tradition). This code is of a particularly ritual nature, and gives full details about the religious festivals to be observed.

### **First phase on Sinai: the Covenant**

The Israelites had just arrived at the meeting fixed for them; there they pitched their camp *facing the mountain*. At once Moses climbed up the rocky slopes to encounter in the imposing solitude the one who had revealed his name as 'I am'. Then began the various episodes, related in a rather complicated way in the Bible, concerning the Covenant.

### **Firstly, the promise of the Covenant (Exod. 19: 1–8)**

In the cloud covering the heights of Horeb Yahweh told Moses that he desired to conclude a Covenant with his people; and he delivered to Moses the message that he was to take down to the 'House of Jacob'. 'Now, if you



Three months after they came out of the land of Egypt . . . the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sinai . . . there in the wilderness they pitched their camp; there facing the mountain Israel pitched camp. Moses then went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Say this to the House of Jacob, declare this to the sons of Israel . . .

Exod. 19: 1-3

*obey my voice and hold fast to my covenant,' added Yahweh, 'you of all nations shall be my very own. . . . I will count you a kingdom of priests.'*<sup>2</sup> *'Those are the words you are to speak to the sons of Israel.'* Moses then went down the mountain and put before the elders what was Yahweh's will. The people's acceptance was immediate and enthusiastic: *'All that Yahweh has said, we will do.'* It was easier said than done, and that indeed sums up the whole history of Israel.

### The theophany (Exod. 19: 16–20)

*'I am coming to you in a dense cloud so that the people may hear when I speak to you and trust you always,' said Yahweh.*

In this mountain range the thunderstorms are really terrifying. Flashes light up the sky over a period of hours, lightning strikes continually and the thunder-claps echo and re-echo deafeningly along the ravines and gorges. At daybreak *there were peals of thunder on the mountain and lightning flashes, a dense cloud, and loud trumpet blast,*<sup>3</sup> *and inside the camp all the people trembled. . . . The mountain of Sinai was entirely wrapped in smoke. . . . Like smoke from a furnace the smoke went up, and the whole mountain shook violently.* Moses stood in the midst of the terrified Hebrews and spoke to God who *answered him with peals of thunder.* Yahweh made use here of fear, but it was only to show, shortly afterwards, his tender care. The senses and imagination must first be

<sup>2</sup> In Semitic civilizations a 'priest' was a mediator between God and the people. A 'kingdom of priests' therefore would be a mediator between God and other peoples.

<sup>3</sup> A thunderstorm was an almost unknown phenomenon in Egypt; these former shepherds of the Wadi Tumilat were panic-stricken at the rumbling and thunderclaps coming from the sky. Rather ingenuously they compared them to the religious signal given by the priest who blew a note on the horn of a ram or ibex. Here, of course, it was the noise made by the storm, giving warning of God's coming and intended to make plain his dominion over the whole of creation.

## The Covenant on Sinai

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impressed before the heart is touched and men's minds are transformed. After forbidding anyone to follow him Moses took the path leading up to the mountain.

At this point there is a break in the narrative with a whole series of obscure phrases whose meaning it is impossible to determine exactly (Exod. 19: 23 does not link up with Exod. 19: 24). In any case, up on the mountain, with the storm still raging and in the blinding light of the lightning flashes, Moses received the promises and made note of Yahweh's demands.

### **Moses face to face with Yahweh: the promises and demands of God (Exod. 20; Deut. 5: 6–21)**

Yahweh declared solemnly to Moses that he remained faithful to his promises. He had kept them in the past, he would keep them in the future.

In return for his protection and goodwill Yahweh required of Israel obedience to his commandments which were contained and stated precisely in the Decalogue. It was, therefore, on the slopes of Horeb (or Sinai) amid the storm and tempest that Moses received from Yahweh the 'Ten Words'.<sup>4</sup> Shortly we shall find Moses taking this message to the people. But at this point a pause must be made in the narrative in order to examine the text of the Decalogue a little more closely.

### **The two versions of the Decalogue**

The 'Ten Words' constitute the religious and moral charter of the Sinai Covenant. The reader of the Bible may well be surprised to find two somewhat different versions of the Decalogue. One appears in Exodus (28: 2–17), the second, a rather later version, in Deuteronomy (5: 6–22). Which of these two versions is the more

<sup>4</sup> In passing it should be noticed that the term 'Decalogue', accepted through use and adopted by biblical scholars on account of its convenience, does not appear in the text of the Bible.

authentic? Hebrew scholars believe that we have here two developed versions in which authors of later periods have endeavoured to make the various articles quite clear; the primitive text, it is thought, has been absorbed by the formulas which we now possess.

### The twofold originality of the Decalogue

Towards the end of the last century, and more especially in more recent years, archaeological excavations have discovered a considerable number of legislative texts of the ancient Near East. Yet in the present stage of our information there is nothing in all this harvest of documents to be compared with the Decalogue of Moses. On the one hand we have the legal texts of Sumer, Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Hittite kingdoms. On the other hand are the 'Ten Words' of Sinai. The difference, both in form and spirit, is obvious and undeniable.

In spirit: from that date the individual's moral conduct was to be regulated not by a penal code but – and this was a novel, unexpected and revolutionary notion – by the Law of an invisible and holy God, who knows everything, sees everything and reads man's soul like an open book.

In form: the common law of the ancient East was an inextricable mass in which it was easy to be lost and entangled, and which endeavoured to cover all kinds of particular cases; now there appeared a code of ten articles in which everything was said in a form that was both succinct and inclusive.

### The Book of the Covenant

Quite certainly the Decalogue constitutes the kernel of Hebrew legislation. But it must be admitted that it is a rather abstract and generalized text; this was of set purpose. But the oriental of ancient times needed the

## The Covenant on Sinai

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precepts of the Decalogue expressed in concrete formulas of a more accessible kind. Hence the Book of the Covenant.

There is no cause for surprise then if it appears to us as a collection of practical laws, providing the immediate solution for problems which crop up at every moment in daily life. In fact the Book of the Covenant is the application of the Decalogue on the civil, criminal and religious planes, all set down without methodical plan and with unexpected repetitions and occasional observations.

The Bible relates that the Book of the Covenant is the result of conversations which Moses had with Yahweh on several occasions. *He spoke to him face to face.* It remains to be seen, however, whether we possess the authentic text of these confrontations on Sinai. Everything points to the fact of the Book of the Covenant having developed over at least the whole period of the sojourn in the desert. In addition, reading of these articles shows clearly their close relationship with the old Semitic or Mesopotamian<sup>5</sup> common law of which they bear the obvious stamp. It must be added that this Book of the Covenant (like the biblical legislation in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) was constantly revised during the following centuries by the Hebrew scribes, who were obliged to adapt the laws in accordance with the historical evolution taking place. But they took such care to remain in spiritual dependence on Moses that it is sometimes difficult to date the texts, except, of course, when characteristic anachronisms

<sup>5</sup> Orientalists have remarked on the curious points of resemblance of the Book of the Covenant with the collections of Mesopotamian laws discovered in some of the libraries of the valley of the Two Rivers – the code of Lipit-ishtar, the code of Eshunna, the code of Hammurabi (now in the Louvre museum in Paris), the Hittite code. It should be noted that there is no question here of direct borrowing from these oriental texts, it is one, rather, of the entirely normal continuity, in the circumstances, of the ancient Mesopotamian common law which assumed different shapes during the centuries and in contact with different civilizations.

(articles concerning work in the fields, cultivation of the vine, beasts for ploughing, houses – so many features that do not apply to a civilization of wandering shepherds) show us clearly that the juridical text attributed to Moses was in fact adapted to new circumstances, brought up to date, completed and put in order.

### The Covenant ratified (Exod. 24)

The conditions of the Covenant, as laid down by Yahweh, had now to be communicated to the Israelites. And so Moses received from Yahweh the order to read out in public the articles of the Law and to ask the people whether they accepted the agreement. In answer they all cried out with enthusiasm '*We will observe all the commands that Yahweh has decreed*'. At once Moses took care to put all the commands received on Sinai in writing.<sup>6</sup> The next day he read out the sacred text to the people gathered at the foot of the mountain.

Before the reading of the Book of the Covenant half of the blood of the sacrificed animals was *cast on the altar*. After the reading, the other half of the blood was used by Moses to sprinkle the people. '*This,' he said, 'is the blood of the Covenant that Yahweh has made with you, containing all these rules.*' Thus the 'bond of life' was established between the contracting parties, Israel became the People of God.

This account belongs to the Elohistic tradition (Exod. 24: 7–8). A few lines further on in this same chapter the

<sup>6</sup> Moses, as a former Egyptian scribe, must certainly have known the hieroglyphic writing of the Egyptians and cuneiform writing as well. He also knew, probably, the ancient Semitic writing of which archaeologists have discovered curious traces on the rocks in certain regions of Sinai – the characters of the last-named probably resembled Phoenician writing. A subsidiary question arises here: what language did Moses speak? Probably one of the Semitic dialects used in Lower Mesopotamia and related to Babylonian. This was the language inherited from the patriarchs. After 1200, when the Israelites settled in the Promised Land, they adopted Canaanite which, subsequently, with certain changes, was to become the language called Hebrew.

## The Covenant on Sinai

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Yahwistic tradition provides another version of the events (Exod. 24: 9–11); here it is a question of a meal taken in the presence of Yahweh on the mountain. Moses was there, of course, together with Aaron and his two sons and the seventy elders of Israel. There was a solemn sharing together of bread and salt; in this can be recognized the form of a ceremonial fellowship meal according to an archaic pattern. It should be noted that the two rites (sprinkling of blood, sacred meal) are in no way mutually exclusive. Obviously the Covenant had now been ratified, for ever it was to be hoped, between Yahweh and his people.

### The Mosaic law or Torah

The Decalogue, the very foundation of the Law, had been handed over, but this could be no more than the beginning of Moses' work. Before leaving the region of Sinai, the Chosen People, called to the loftiest of spiritual missions, had to be endowed with a complete system of laws, with clear principles. The People of God had to be spiritually armed with the Law of God.

After the ratification of the Covenant the epic story continues: Yahweh ordered Moses to take once more the steep path leading to the upper slopes of Horeb, then hidden in the clouds. Accompanied by the faithful Joshua, Moses climbed up the mountain. For six days the two Israelites camped half-way up awaiting the divine commands. On the seventh day Yahweh summoned Moses: he was to go up alone towards the cloud and Joshua was to await his return. During this time Moses was to learn the principal themes of the Law.

There can obviously be no question in a book of this nature of studying in detail this Mosaic law or Torah, which is scattered about in different books of the Old Testament. Here all that can be attempted is a summary

which, respecting both the thought and the spirit of this legislation, divides its numerous articles under three heads:

- religious and moral elements;
- liturgical elements;
- social elements.

### The Mosaic Law: the religious and moral code

Yahweh is a 'jealous God', '*Yahweh's name is the Jealous One*', he himself declared to Moses (Exod. 20: 5; 24: 14). By this is to be understood that he categorically refused to share worship and adoration with the other deities venerated by neighbouring peoples (Exod. 20: 3; 22: 19; 34: 14). The God of Sinai was not to be put on the same footing as the idols of Mesopotamia, Canaan and Egypt. He vehemently rejected these *nothings* as he termed the Egyptian idols. To Yahweh, and to him alone, were due the homage, prayer and adoration of the people whom he had chosen.

It was forbidden even to utter the name of another god. '*Let it not be heard from your lips*' (Exod. 23: 13). It was equally forbidden, of course, to blaspheme the name of Yahweh (Exod. 22: 27) or to set up on the altar gods of silver and gold. Yahweh is a spiritual God.

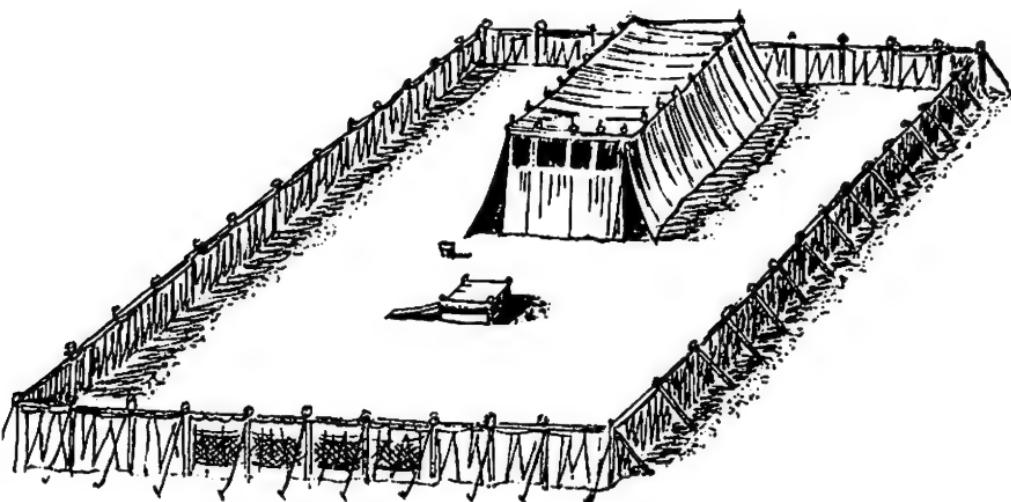
### The Mosaic law: the liturgical code

'*Build me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them*' [the sons of Jacob]. The people whom Moses had led out of Egypt for centuries past had been wandering shepherds. Consequently, the temple that they were to put up to the glory of their God, the furnishings to be provided for the purposes of worship, by definition had all to be of the kind that could be dismantled or, at least, easily transportable. The temple had the appearance of a movable camp, a sort of cloth village, with light furn-

## The Covenant on Sinai

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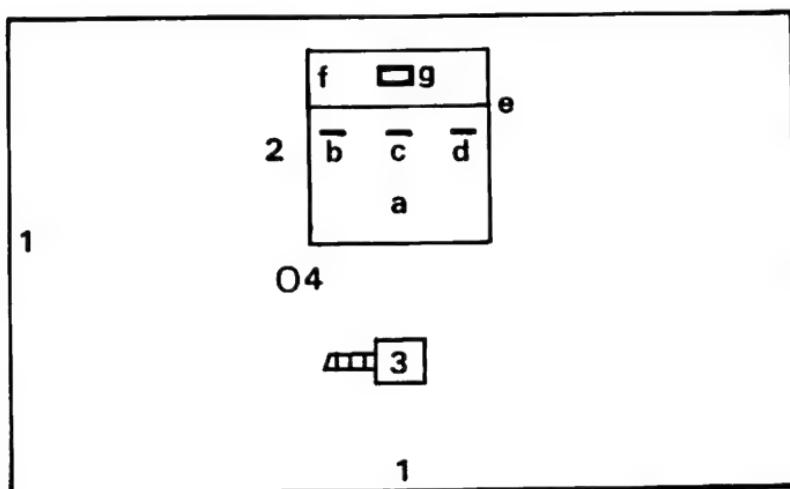
ishings – a wooden ark for carrying the two stones on which the Law was engraved, a very small table, easily movable altars, hangings that could be rolled up – all of it of a kind that could follow the caravan as it moved slowly from place to place.



*Yahweh spoke to Moses and said, 'Tell the sons of Israel to set aside a contribution for me; you shall accept this contribution from every man whose heart prompts him to give it. You shall accept from them the following contributions: gold, silver and bronze; purple stuffs, of violet shade and red, crimson stuffs, fine linen, goats' hair; rams' skins dyed red, fine leather, acacia wood; oil for the lamps, spices for the chrism and for the fragrant incense; onyx stones and gems to be set in ephod and pectoral. Build me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them' (Exod. 25: 1–8).*

It was many years after the journey in the wilderness before even the earliest of the descriptions of the events of Moses' time was written down. By then Solomon had built the Temple in Jerusalem. Parts of the description

of the sanctuary set up by the Hebrew people in the wilderness belong to a much later period even than that of Solomon. There can be no doubt that the story tellers who told and retold the epic, and the scribes who wrote it down and edited it, expanded the early traditions with descriptions of the Temple. It is impossible to say which



### THE DWELLING

1. The sacred enclosure or court: Width 100 cubits (150 feet); length 50 cubits (75 feet).
2. The Tabernacle (or tent).
  - (a) the Holy Place
  - (b) the altar of incense (1 cubit –  $1\frac{1}{2}$  feet – square)
  - (c) the seven-branched candlestick
  - (d) table for the loaves of offering (with 12 loaves)
  - (e) veil separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies
  - (f) the Holy of Holies
  - (g) the ark of the Covenant (inside the tables of the Law; a vessel containing a measure of manna).
3. the altar of holocaust
4. the bronze basin.

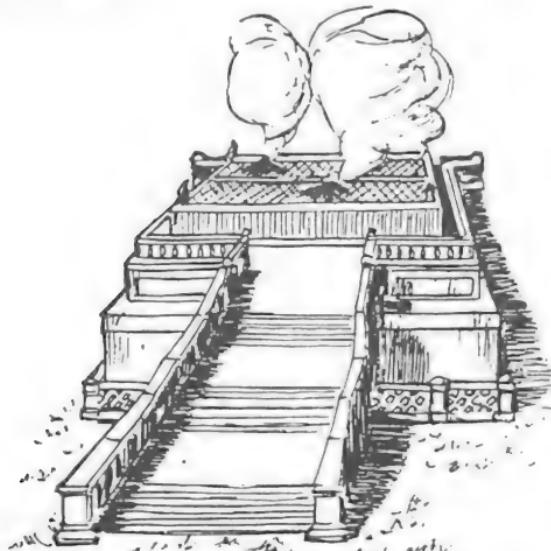
of the details in the pages which follow belong to the time of Moses himself, and which of them arose as the worship of Yahweh grew more and more elaborate during the time of the monarchy and of the years after the exile in Babylon. What, then, is the point of all this detailed description? A most important one: it is a vivid symbol of the enduring influence of the wilderness period and of the Covenant. No matter how elaborate the worship of Yahweh became, nor how it was adapted to the changing needs of successive generations, the truth revealed through Moses remained at the centre of it. The God whom they worshipped was Yahweh who had chosen them and who had demonstrated his power by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. It is this, rather than any attempt to accept the details as literal descriptions of the wilderness sanctuary, which we must bear in mind as we read the accounts.

This was how the temple, the Dwelling of Yahweh, was to be set up in the wilderness (see plan on opposite page).

The altar of holocaust (Exod. 27: 1-8) stood almost at the centre of the court and was five cubits square; it was made of acacia wood and plated with bronze. (The length of the cubit varied at different periods, here the royal cubit of eighteen inches has been adopted.) On this altar a sacrifice was offered in the morning and the evening (Exod. 27). At the four corners it was adorned with 'horns', symbolizing the power of God. The sacrificing priest after having himself killed the victim sprinkled the horns of the altar with blood. Then the flesh was burned in honour of God. To carry this massive altar from one halting-place to another on each corner bronze rings were fixed through which were passed shafts of acacia wood plated with bronze.

The basin (Exod. 30: 17-21). Standing further

towards the front and to the left was a bronze basin on a stand filled with water. Here Aaron (who during the last period of the sojourn at Sinai received from Moses consecration as a priest) before every religious act washed his hands and feet.



**ALTAR OF HOLOCAUST  
(attempted reconstruction)**

*'You are to make an altar out of acacia wood, a square five cubits long and five cubits wide, its height to be three cubits. At its four corners you are to put horns, the horns to be of one piece with it, plating it with bronze. . . . You are to make the altar hollow, of boards' (Exod. 27: 1-2, 8).*

The Tabernacle (*tabernaculum*, tent) was the movable tent intended to harbour the ark of the Covenant. Moses called it the Tent of Meeting; it was there that he went to receive Yahweh's pronouncements.

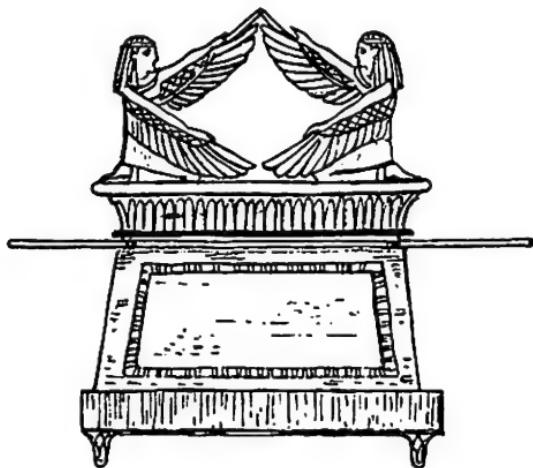
Inside, at a point about two-thirds of the way along the Tabernacle hung a veil of *purple stuffs, violet shade and red, of crimson stuffs, and of fine twined linen*. Yahweh

ordered that it was to be '*finely embroidered with cherubs*' (Exod. 26: 31). Thus this curtain divided the Tabernacle into two unequal parts: on the entrance side, with the Holy Place; behind the veil was the Holy of Holies in which stood the ark in silence and darkness.

Thus the ark, over which Yahweh, the invisible God, was supposed to stand, had its place in the most secret part of the Tabernacle.

The ark was in the form of a chest, rather like an Egyptian *naos* in which in solemn procession the priests of the Nile valley carried one of their numerous deities; it was made of acacia, the only workable wood to be found in the peninsula. Its dimensions were as follows: length, two and a half cubits (three feet nine inches); width, one and a half cubits (two feet three inches) and the height also one and a half cubits. It was plated with pure gold inside and out and a gold moulding formed the decoration all round it. On each side at the corners were gold rings, four in all through which shafts of acacia wood, covered with gold leaf, were passed. These two shafts always remained in place, even when the ark was standing behind the veil. On the top of the ark was the throne of mercy of pure gold. Two golden cherubs, in bas-relief, were attached to either end of the throne of mercy. It is not known whether this form of ornament represented Egyptian figures (winged sphinx with human head) or animals derived from the Babylonian pantheon (winged bulls with men's faces). In any case the two figures were to face each other *with their wings spread upwards so that they overshadow the throne of mercy . . . their faces turned towards the throne of mercy*.

In short, the throne of mercy can be regarded as the throne of the invisible God. Yahweh said to Moses, '*There I shall come to meet you; there, from above the throne of mercy, from between the two cherubs that are on the ark*



### ARK OF THE COVENANT (attempted reconstruction)

*'You are to make me an ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, one and a half cubits wide, one and a half cubits high. You are to plate it, inside and out, with pure gold, and decorate it all round with a gold moulding. You will cast four gold rings for the ark and fix them to its four supports: two rings on one side and two rings on the other. You will also make shafts of acacia wood plated with gold and pass the shafts through the rings on the sides of the ark, to carry the ark by these. The shafts must remain in the rings of the ark and not be withdrawn. . . .*

*'Further, you are to make a throne of mercy, of pure gold, two and a half cubits long, and one and a half cubits wide. For the two ends of this throne of mercy you are to make two golden cherubs; you are to make them of beaten gold. Make the first cherub for one end and the second for the other, and fasten them to the two ends of the throne of mercy so that they make one piece with it. The cherubs are to have their wings spread upwards so that they overshadow the throne of mercy. . . . Inside the ark you must place the Testimony that I shall give you' (Exod. 25: 10-21).*

## The Covenant on Sinai

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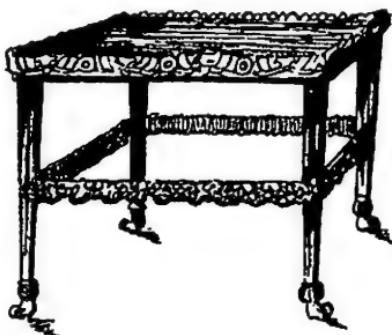
*'of the Testimony, I shall give you all my commands for the sons of Israel'* (Exod. 25: 22).

Later on we shall find Yahweh entrusting his faithful servant Moses with the two stone tablets on which were engraved the articles of the Decalogue. These tablets were placed inside the ark.

Also in the ark, beside the two tablets with the 'ten words' of the Law was a receptacle containing a *full omer of manna* (Exod. 16: 34), that is, very nearly a gallon of it; it was fitting for Israel to keep the memory of the miraculous food which fed them in the wilderness.

The following details are also relevant here.

In front of the ark of the Covenant, but on the other side



**THE TABLE FOR THE OFFERTORY BREAD**  
(attempted reconstruction)

*'You are to make a table of acacia wood, two cubits long, one cubit wide, and one and a half cubits high. You are to plate it with pure gold, and decorate it all round with a gold moulding. You are to fit it with struts, one hand's breadth wide, and decorate these with a gold moulding. You are to make for it four gold rings and fix these at the four corners where the four legs are. The rings are to lie close to the struts to hold the shafts for carrying the table. You are to make the shafts of acacia wood and plate them with gold. . . . On the table, before me, you must place the bread of continual offering'* (Exod. 25: 23-30).

of the veil (that is, in the Holy Place and not in the Holy of Holies) stood the table for the offertory bread; it was made of acacia wood and plated with pure gold. It was a piece of liturgical furniture but quite small (length, two cubits; width one cubit, that is, three feet by one and a half) on which were placed the twelve loaves of offering; these were changed every week; they symbolized the presence of the twelve tribes in constant prayer before Yahweh.

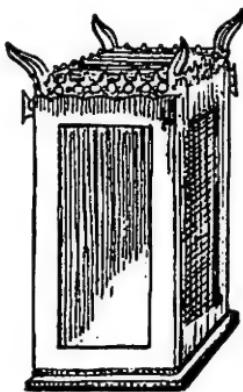


### THE LAMP-STAND

*'You are to make a lamp-stand of pure gold; the lamp-stand must be of beaten gold, base and stem. Its cups – calyx and petals – must be of one piece with it. . . Then you are to make lamps for it, seven of them, and set them so that they throw their light towards the front of it'* (Exod. 25: 31, 37).

Then there was the lamp-stand with its seven branches, made of pure beaten gold; on it were seven lamps throwing their light towards the front; snuffers and trays were of the same material. In the Holy Place, also, stood a

small altar (one cubit by one cubit, that is, one and a half feet by one and a half feet) called the altar of incense (Exod. 30).



### THE ALTAR OF INCENSE

*'You must make an altar on which to burn incense; you are to make it out of acacia wood. It is to be one cubit long, and one cubit wide – that is to say, square – and to stand two cubits high; its horns are to be of one piece with it. The top of it, its surrounding sides, and its horns, are to be plated with pure gold, and decorated with a gold moulding all round. . . . You are to set up the altar before the veil that is in front of the ark of Testimony. . . . There Aaron must burn fragrant incense each morning, when he trims the lamps. . . . You must make these offerings of incense before Yahweh unfailingly from generation to generation. . . . This altar of supreme holiness is to be consecrated to Yahweh'* (Exod. 30: 1–10).

This concludes the liturgical code.

### The Mosaic Law: the civil code

In many of its articles the code given on Sinai seems to repeat, arrange and when necessary correct the old

fundamental law of the ancient East, several versions of which are nowadays known. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to assimilate the Mosaic Law too closely to certain collections of Mesopotamian laws, whether earlier or later than the Exodus.

At the outset it seems that the heart of the lawgiver is moved a little by certain of the requirements of this Law which were necessary for the establishment of social life, of course, but on occasion were unrelenting. That is why the Mosaic Law makes an appeal for mercy when it is a question of the widow, the orphan, the slave and even the foreigner.

There is another far more original feature which governs and indeed is the crowning achievement of the law of Israel; for the private individual it is no longer a matter of merely refraining from killing, from stealing or committing adultery. It is far more important still to keep the commandments of the Decalogue with fervour in an endeavour to come closer to the purity of God. '*You will be holy for me,*' Yahweh declared. In the history of law this appears as an entirely new standpoint.

To complete the moral aspect of this legislation, it should be added that henceforward the Israelites were ruled by a constitution which was eminently democratic; there was complete equality before the Law.

### **The tablets of the Law (Exod. 31: 18)**

So it was that in the cloud Moses was informed of the legal principles which were intended to serve as the foundation of the civilization of the Chosen People. Before going down to the plain where the tents were standing Moses received the two tablets of stone. In the East it was customary to inscribe legal texts either on blocks of stone (the Hammurabi code, for example) or on a stele (the decrees of Horemheb).

## The Covenant on Sinai

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*Tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.* The expression is of Egyptian origin; Moses the scribe must have remembered it. These terms were used in the valley of the Nile to signify that the religious text in question was an authentic expression of the divine will.

These tablets were inscribed on both faces.

### Was the God of Moses the God of Abraham?

Before going further it seems necessary to raise this question in order to see the progress made in Israel's spiritual evolution. More than five centuries separated Abraham and Moses and yet at both the spiritual and historical levels how near they seem to each other! The facts speak for themselves.

**The Promise.** At the Oak of Moreh, at Shechem, Yahweh told the shepherd Abraham that as a reward for his faith his descendants would one day possess as their own the land of Canaan. Six hundred years afterwards, on Sinai, Yahweh ordered Moses to snatch the sons of Jacob from Egyptian slavery and lead them to the borders of the Promised Land. We have here an historical sequence of events, a progression.

**The Covenant.** At the Oak of Mamre, near Hebron, Yahweh concluded a Covenant with Abraham in accordance with an archaic ritual (an ox divided down the middle and the two contracting parties walking between the two portions) in which the clauses remained rather vague. Six hundred years afterwards, on Sinai, Yahweh concluded a new Covenant, but this time the conditions are carefully laid down (Deuteronomy, various codes). Once again there is an historical sequence of events, a progression.

**Monotheism.** In the pastoral surroundings of Haran, in the Upper Euphrates, Abraham broke with polytheism directly the 'one God' revealed himself. He was a tribal

God who merely ensured the protection of the tiny Aramean clan. Henceforward Abraham acknowledged but the one God, his own, though perhaps without still denying the existence and powers of the other deities venerated among the neighbouring tribes or in other nearby countries. Abraham, then, was no longer a polytheist. Six hundred years later Moses appeared to have been in the same position. Yahweh still remained a tribal God (the God of the Israelite tribes); he was not yet a universal God. Nevertheless, certain expressions used by the writer of Exodus enable us to discern here and there, certain new and somewhat timid theological glimmerings. Yahweh declares loftily that the Egyptian idols are nothing. In addition, the ten plagues are intended to prove to Pharaoh, and by the same token to the Israelites, that the God of the Israelites is more powerful than the tutelary deities of the Egyptians. Moreover, the Yahweh of Moses was revealed from time to time as the absolute master of the earth. Nonetheless, he remained still, and exclusively, the God of Israel. Since the time of Abraham there had indeed been progress but hardly a theological revolution. In fact the principal step forward was not taken until the eighth – six centuries with the great prophets, the real founders of monotheism.

**Morality.** From Abraham to Moses on this point the evolution was amazing. From the conscience of Abraham, still plunged in darkness, to the dazzling laws of the Decalogue, the progress achieved by humanity was immense.

From Abraham to Moses, from Paddan-aram to the mountain of Horeb, it was always the same God who spoke untiringly to his chosen ones.

The modern reader of the Bible may well wonder under what form Yahweh manifested himself to Moses. At the Burning Bush we know that he heard merely a voice. But

## The Covenant on Sinai

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what happened on Sinai during those numerous conversations which sometimes lasted, according to the account, for forty days on end?

*Yahweh*, Exodus tells us, *would speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend* (33: 11). In Numbers it is said that Yahweh spoke to Moses *mouth to mouth* and in Deuteronomy we find, *Moses, the man Yahweh knew face to face* (Deut. 34: 10). In another chapter it is stated quite explicitly that Moses, then on Sinai, asked God for the signal favour of seeing his glory: '*Show me your glory, I beg you*' (Exod. 33: 18). '*You cannot see my face*', replied Yahweh at once, '*for man cannot see me and live*.' That was quite clear. Theologians indeed consider that it is very exceptional for God to appear to his creatures and that great prudence is required in dealing with this subject.

Thus we shall remain within the confines of strict orthodoxy if we regard these conversations 'face to face' as experiences of an entirely interior nature and of transcendental origin without, for all that, exaggerating them unduly.

### Breaking of the Covenant (the Golden Calf)

It was weeks since Moses had gone up the mountain and his lengthy absence was beginning to worry the people. A few ringleaders and some discontents approached Aaron and persuaded him to make them a god 'to go at their head'. These still primitive populations found it very difficult to imagine Yahweh and wanted him to be represented by something, a bull for example, to which their homage could be more easily paid.

Aaron, Moses' brother who was later to become high priest of Israel, was often weak and vacillating; on this occasion he offered no opposition to this religious revolution. Without more ado he ordered the gold rings

worn by the women, girls and youths to be collected. The gold was melted down and the effigy of a calf was cast and placed upon an altar.

Historians have often explained the unfortunate setting up of the golden calf as a borrowing from the Egyptian worship of the bull Apis, but modern orientalists are more inclined to see in this animal representation the resurgence of an ancient Semitic and also Mesopotamian religion.

In the biblical text, however, the fundamental characteristics of this worship are by no means clearly described; the several traditions are so mixed up together that it is impossible to distinguish them clearly, and many scholars believe that the difficulties of interpretation are too great to be capable of solution. Sometimes the golden calf is represented as a low-class idol (Exod. 32: 30), sometimes as Yahweh's rival (Exod. 32: 25) and even, somewhat bafflingly, as a form of Yahweh (Exod. 32: 5). In any case the people made an image of molten metal before which they bowed, and this was a flagrant breach of the second commandment.

Half-way down the mountain Moses rejoined the faithful Joshua who had awaited him there for forty days; together the two men continued the descent. Very soon they began to hear the sound of musical instruments and chanting, all the noise of a festival. Then they saw the statue of the calf, the choirs singing, the dancing girls and the whole population in a state of excitement. Aaron came forward stammering out his explanation: '*Let not my Lord's anger blaze like this. You know yourself how prone this people is to evil. They said to me, "Make us a god to go at our head". . . So I said to them, "Who has gold?" and they took it off and brought it to me. I threw it into the fire [of the melting pot] and out came this calf.*'

Moses' reaction was immediate and merciless. He

## The Covenant on Sinai

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threw down the tablets of the Law on which were engraved the 'Ten Words' of Yahweh; then before the people he broke the tablets. Then he rushed to the altar, threw down the idol, 'the work of sin', cast it into the fire and burned it; the ashes he threw into a stream<sup>7</sup> nearby. Then, going to the gate of the camp he gave the alarm and rallying cry, '*Who is for Yahweh? To me!*' At once the sons of Levi, fierce defenders of the faith, gathered around the leader. And of course Moses himself belonged to the tribe of Levi. Orders were given to these men to go through the camp, sword in hand, and without mercy to kill the guilty ones. Was the great adventure of Israel, willed and protected by Yahweh, to end so lamentably, almost at its beginning, at the foot of Sinai?

### Moses intercedes with Yahweh to save Israel

In the first books of the Old Testament the rather primitive mentality of the Israelites gave rise to naïve forms of anthropomorphism. Thus, in the face of the Israelites' disobedience in bowing down before the golden calf, Yahweh gave way to anger.<sup>8</sup> '*I can see how headstrong these people are!*' said Yahweh. '*Leave me, now, my wrath shall blaze out against them and devour them; of you, however, I will make a great nation.*'

Then in the anguished, dramatic silence Moses prayed, arguing point by point with Yahweh. In the end

<sup>7</sup> The stream: this is the version given by Deuteronomy (9: 21). In the corresponding chapter of Exodus (32: 20) we find Moses throwing the powder from the burned and ground gold statue into water which he made the men of Israel drink. This is probably an instance of trial by ordeal, namely, the judgement of God, intended to designate the guilty ones and spare the innocent. A well-known example of an ordeal is the treatment that was meted out to a wife suspected of adultery: the 'waters of bitterness' that she was obliged to drink brought a curse on her if she was guilty (Numb. 5: 11 following). Here, at the camp on Sinai, it appears that the search for those responsible for the worship of the golden calf was conducted in the same way.

<sup>8</sup> The order of this chapter of Exodus has not been followed exactly here. It seemed clearer, in fact, to place Yahweh's anger and Moses' prayer after the discovery by Moses of the golden calf.

Yahweh declared himself satisfied. He *relented* and did not *bring on his people the disaster that he had threatened.*

### Renewal of the Covenant

Moses, having returned to Mount Sinai where, once more for a period of forty days, he renewed his 'conversation' with Yahweh, thus managed to obtain forgiveness for his people. Finally, after several vehement refusals Yahweh allowed himself to be moved by his envoy's plea. He agreed to draw up a new Covenant with this *headstrong people.*

The first Covenant concluded on the Israelites' arrival at the foot of Sinai is recorded by the Elohistic writer. The second Covenant, whose clauses were laid down shortly before leaving the region of the holy mountain, are recorded by the Yahwistic writer: that is why it is sometimes called the Yahwistic code of the Covenant.<sup>9</sup> In this new body of legislation, which Moses obtained with such difficulty after the apostasy of Israel, two clearly distinct parts can be seen. On the one hand Yahweh declared, in conclusion, that he agreed to guide the Chosen People to the Promised Land; always, of course, on condition that they remained faithful to his commandments. On the other hand, there is a rapid reminder of the Law that must be observed, but this takes the form rather of a code of worship.

### The new tablets of the Law (Exod. 34: 29–35)

When Yahweh summoned Moses in the cloud on the upper slopes of Mount Sinai to communicate the text

<sup>9</sup> The code of the renewal of the Covenant has sometimes been wrongly called the second Decalogue, or the ritual Decalogue. The term is unfortunate because it further confuses an already complicated situation. The code of the renewal of the Covenant is clearly different from the 'Ten Words' of Sinai. It is rather a collection of religious principles refashioned, moreover, at a late period under the influence of Deuteronomy.

## The Covenant on Sinai

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of the new Covenant he gave the following instructions: '*Cut two tablets of stone like the first and come up to me on the mountain, and I will inscribe on them the words that were on the first tablets which you broke.*'

So after this further period of forty days, when Moses went down to the Hebrew camp on the plain, he carried the text of the Decalogue inscribed on stone to replace the one he had previously destroyed in a fit of anger at the sight of the golden calf. There was a further surprise, this time for the Israelites. For *the skin on his face was radiant after speaking with Yahweh. And when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, the skin on his face shone so much that they would not venture near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron with all the leaders of the community came back to him; and he spoke to them. Then all the sons of Israel came closer, and he passed on to them all the orders that Yahweh had given him on the mountain of Sinai* (Exod. 34: 29–32).<sup>10</sup>

Out of humility Moses henceforward placed a veil over his face. He removed it only in the Tabernacle when he 'conversed' with Yahweh.

### The building of the sanctuary

Accordingly without delay they had to proceed with the building of the sanctuary which served as a Dwelling for Yahweh. Moses therefore summoned the most skilled workmen from among the different tribes. In fact some of

<sup>10</sup> 'The skin on his face was radiant.' The reader probably knows, at least through reproductions, the splendid marble statue of Moses by Michelangelo. The sculptor, to show on Moses' face a reflection of Yahweh's glory, has given him two rams horns. This is explained by the fact that the sculptor followed the Vulgate whose author in this passage translated the original text in too literal a fashion. In Hebrew the verb *qaran* (give out rays) is associated with the substantive *qeren* (horn) – the horn of certain animals, the ox, for example, was compared poetically to a ray of light. The Latin author of the Vulgate has translated this passage by the words 'His face was horned'. Nowadays orientalists correct the passage to 'his face was shining'. Michelangelo's Moses has served as a model for many sculptors and painters; hence these unexpected horns with which Moses is bedecked.

the Israelites had previously belonged to the Egyptian workshops where they had acquired the necessary technical skills. At once these various specialists, goldsmiths, metal workers, carpenters, weavers, tanners and decorators came forward, enthusiastically offering their services. At their head Moses appointed a clever leader of the name of Bezalel with a certain Oholiab as his assistant.

In addition, the people were invited to provide on the basis of voluntary contributions the raw materials for the construction and adornment of the Dwelling. Here, too, the request was heard and answered with enthusiasm. From all sides there flowed *gold, silver and bronze; purple stuffs, of violet shade and red, crimson stuffs, fine linen, goats' hair, rams' skins dyed red and fine leather, acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the chrism and for the fragrant incense; onyx stones and gems . . .* (Exod. 35: 5–9). The offerings were so plentiful that soon Moses was obliged to have it proclaimed throughout the camp that the collection had come to an end as the craftsmen had now enough materials for their work.

When the tents of the Israelites had been in position for nine months at the foot of Sinai the work of building the sanctuary was finished.

### **The consecration of the priests (Exod. 40, Levit. 8)**

Directions for this had been given to Moses by Yahweh. Aaron and his sons came forward across the court towards the Tent of Meeting, but halted at the bronze basin to carry out the ritual washing – of their hands and feet – as a sign of purification. Then they went towards the Tent; on the threshold Moses awaited them (see plan of the Dwelling, p. 112).

Moses then, with consecrated oil, anointed Aaron and his sons on their foreheads and on each he put a linen tunic. Thus was conferred on them *the priesthood in*

*perpetuity from generation to generation.* Leviticus provides a detailed description of the ordination rite. The central theme of the rite, as it is described, certainly goes back to the Mosaic period. But if the modern reader is brave enough to read these endless and detailed liturgical directions he must not forget that until the sixth century B.C. the ceremonial in question was revised, augmented and embellished by successive generations of oriental liturgists. It is not, therefore, an exact account of the investiture of Aaron that we have here but rather, historically speaking, the consecration of a Jewish high priest after the return from the Babylonian exile (538 B.C.). And the same applies, of course, to the complicated ritual of the various and very numerous sacrifices.

On the same day that Aaron was anointed with oil a tragedy occurred: two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu were imprudent and irreverent enough to place in their censers *unlawful fire before Yahweh, fire which he had not prescribed for them* (Lev. 10). It should be pointed out here that in the East ceremonial assumes considerable importance, the least gesture wrongly executed by the priest inevitably placing the full effect of the sacrifice in peril. Everything that is laid down must be carried out to the last detail. Biblical scholars regard this account as a moral fable in the form of a tragedy intended to warn officiants against liturgical mistakes of any kind.

Shortly afterwards, we find the 'princes', that is, the leaders of the twelve tribes, going to the sanctuary to present their offerings. The conclusion of the liturgical ceremonies for the inauguration of the sanctuary was marked by the consecration of the Levites (Numb. 8: 5-6), which most biblical commentators regard as an anticipation of what was done some centuries later. A

short explanation is required here. Aaron, like his brother Moses, belonged to the tribe of Levi. Henceforward, after Aaron's consecration, both he and his descendants were priests of Israel, sacred ministers. The other men of the tribe of Levi, now called Levites, did not share in the priesthood but they were the priests' assistants, serving the altars and, on journeys, carrying the various components of the Dwelling. Priests and Levites must not therefore be confused, although they always worked in conjunction with each other. The Levites began their functions at the age of twenty and continued in them until they were fifty, though after this age they still helped, so far as they could and were able, the Levites in office. Here again, a distinction which only emerged later may have been attributed to the time of Moses.

The Israelites' portable Temple had now been completed. The priesthood had been instituted, the service of the sanctuary was organized. Yahweh was now ready, according to the somewhat primitive ideas of the Mosaic period, to set out over the paths and tracks of the steppe where he was to accompany his people as their protector.

### **Organization of the journey; establishment of the camp**

Very soon, then, they had to set out again, taking with them Yahweh's Dwelling. Briefly, the following was the order in which they marched.

Moses showed himself in all circumstances, a first-rate organizer; he began now by taking a census of the tribes, since it was of prime importance to have an accurate idea of the military strength that could be put into the field, for it was very probable that on their journey they would be obliged to join battle. Already, of course, a first census had been held for the levying of the poll-tax

(Exod. 30: 11–16); the second was carried out easily and rapidly. The statement in the Book of Numbers that there were 603,550 men at arms able if necessary to take part in a battle gives the impression that the total population of the tribes of Israel was between two and three millions; it has been pointed out on several occasions that the ancient East had a great tendency to exaggerate numbers.

The term 'the twelve tribes' has already been employed, but should be used with caution, for in fact it was only with Joshua and the ceremony at Shechem that it is really correct to speak of the twelve tribes. Before Shechem, there were probably not quite so many. The repeated use of the term the 'twelve tribes' and, more especially, of their names, and of the names of the chiefs incorporated in the census by Moses, appears to be of a much later period. They may well have been inserted in the text in order to guarantee the rights of the various Israelite groups at the time of the territorial division of the land of Canaan.

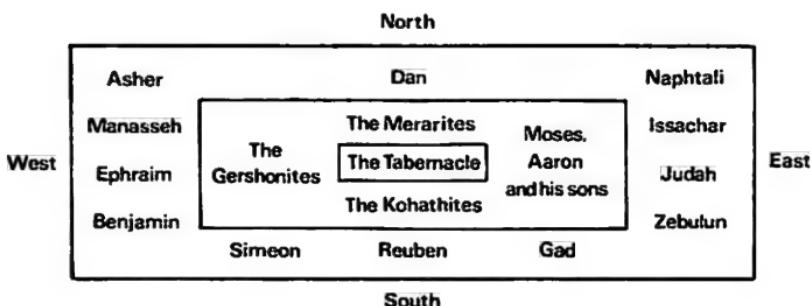
The census of the tribe of Levi, the priestly caste, exempt from military service, was carried out in a special way. The descendants of Levi were given a special status, differentiating them from the other Israelites.

The following was the order to be adopted so far as possible, according to the Book of Numbers, as the Israelites moved over the tracks of the wilderness.

In the vanguard, one behind the other, marched the tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun. They were followed by a further body made up of the tribes of Reuben, Simeon and Gad. Next came the band of Levites carrying the various parts of the dismantled Tabernacle, followed by the Dwelling of Yahweh, with its various components partially dismantled and carefully wrapped in skins and hangings so as to be hidden from the eyes of

## Moses and Joshua, Founders of the Nation

all. Then followed the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. The rearguard was formed by the tribes of Benjamin, Asher and Naphtali.<sup>11</sup> When they halted the tribes took up their positions around the tabernacle in the form of a threefold quadrilateral, as shown by the diagram below.



### Before leaving Sinai: the second Passover (Numb. 9: 1–14)

A year had already passed since the Israelites had fled from the Egyptian bondage.

The first Passover had been celebrated in an atmosphere of drama on the night when they had left the land of Egypt. The second Passover was celebrated at the foot of Sinai before leaving the holy mountain for ever; it took place in an atmosphere of gladness and hope.

On this occasion the Bible repeats the prescriptions; a paragraph, obviously of a later date than the period concerning us here, gives instructions which proved very useful for the Jews of the diaspora,<sup>12</sup> who were absent from Judaea on the occasion of a journey or who were permanently settled in a foreign land; they were under

<sup>11</sup> That is the order given by Numb. 2: 1–34; it varies slightly from that given in Numb. 10: 12–28.

<sup>12</sup> The diaspora is the name of the Jewish colonies in pagan lands. After A.D. 70, the year of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies, the history of the diaspora became the history of the Jews.

## The Covenant on Sinai

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strict obligation to keep the Passover with all the *laws and customs proper to it*.

### **The Israelites leave Sinai** (Numb. 10: 11–28, 33–36)

It was *in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month*, that the great departure took place. As the Israelites had arrived at Sinai in the third month of the first year (Exod. 19: 1), their stay in the region of Sinai lasted a little less than a year. They left Sinai a month after the end of the Passover celebrated there.

On that morning, in the plain at the foot of the mountains, the Israelites lined up in the order laid down: by 'houses', by clans, by tribes. Men, women and children surrounded the flocks; the tents and baggage had already been loaded on the donkeys.

The cloud<sup>13</sup> lifted over the tabernacle of Witness; this was the signal awaited by Moses. At once Aaron and one of his sons sounded the silver trumpets. On all sides rose up the ritual acclamations. The tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun then set out towards the north and the wilderness of Paran. The Levites had quickly dismantled the Dwelling. Just as the ark of the Covenant, taken up by the porters, was on the point of joining the column, Moses addressed this invocation to Yahweh:

*Arise, Yahweh, may your enemies be scattered and those who hate you run!*

Behind the tabernacle the other tribes, drawn up in

<sup>13</sup> This cloud has already been mentioned. It led the Israelites, the Bible tells us, on the route from Egypt to Sinai, and once more from Sinai to Kadesh, then from Kadesh to the Promised Land. It marked out the route to be followed by the caravan, rising to indicate the time for departure, coming to rest to show a halt. The various traditional cycles used by the writer of the Pentateuch do not agree very closely in describing this cloud. To the Yahwistic tradition it is a column of cloud and a column of fire; for the Elohistic tradition it is a dark cloud; in the Priestly tradition during the night there appeared the 'glory of Yahweh', a sort of consuming fire, moving from place to place like God himself. These different images, undeniably belonging to the epic style, agree in principle: their object is to suggest the real presence of Yahweh, accompanying his temple, step by step.

## Moses and Joshua, Founders of the Nation

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their strict order, moved forward. The Chosen People, carrying the Dwelling of their invisible God, set out towards Kadesh, the great oasis of the wilderness of Paran, a very suitable base for an attack on Palestine.

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## THE LONG HALT AT KADESH

There were three principal breaks in the long journey of the Exodus: Sinai where the Israelites remained very nearly a year, as we have just seen; the oasis of Kadesh where Moses and the ark stayed for about thirty-eight years (if, that is, the symbolic number of 'forty years' for the duration of the Exodus is taken literally); Mount Nebo where Moses died, looking towards the Promised Land which he could see in the distance, but which he was not allowed to enter. From Kadesh to Mount Nebo the journey took scarcely a year. The long halt at Kadesh is a period of considerable importance in the formative history of Israel.

### **The journey to Kadesh (Numb. 11–12)**

The journey proved long and arduous. It took eleven days to cross the wilderness of Sin and Paran. Complaints were frequent and on occasion open rebellion was very near. There was no lack of incidents.

We know only the most important halts; some of them are difficult to identify, and indeed their enumeration differs from chapter to chapter, possibly because all the tribes did not follow exactly the same route. Here the three principal stages can be mentioned (see map, p. 138).

Firstly, there was Taberah ('burning'). The people complained bitterly of the difficulties and fatigues of the journey, *a lament that was offensive to Yahweh's ears*. One day the tents caught fire; it was seen as a manifestation of Yahweh's anger (Numb. 11: 1).

At Kibroth-hattaavah ('graves of craving') the people began to complain about the manna of which they were growing tired. '*Who will give us meat to eat?*' they exclaimed. '*Think of the fish we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic... there is nothing but manna for us to look at!*' Fortunately it was springtime, the season for the migration of quails; a flight of these birds swooped down on the camp and enabled the Israelites to eat to their hearts' content. But food-poisoning from the flesh of these birds unfortunately caused several deaths. To this baleful place the name of Kibroth-hattaavah ('graves of craving') was given, for it was there that were *buried the people who had indulged their greed*.

Greatly upset, Moses asked God to relieve him of his charge: '*I am not able to carry this nation by myself alone; the weight is too much for me. If this is how you want to deal with me, I would rather you killed me! If only I had found favour in your eyes, and not lived to see such misery as this!*' Yahweh agreed to lighten the burden of his envoy; henceforth seventy elders of Israel would be allowed to go with Moses to the Tent of Meeting.

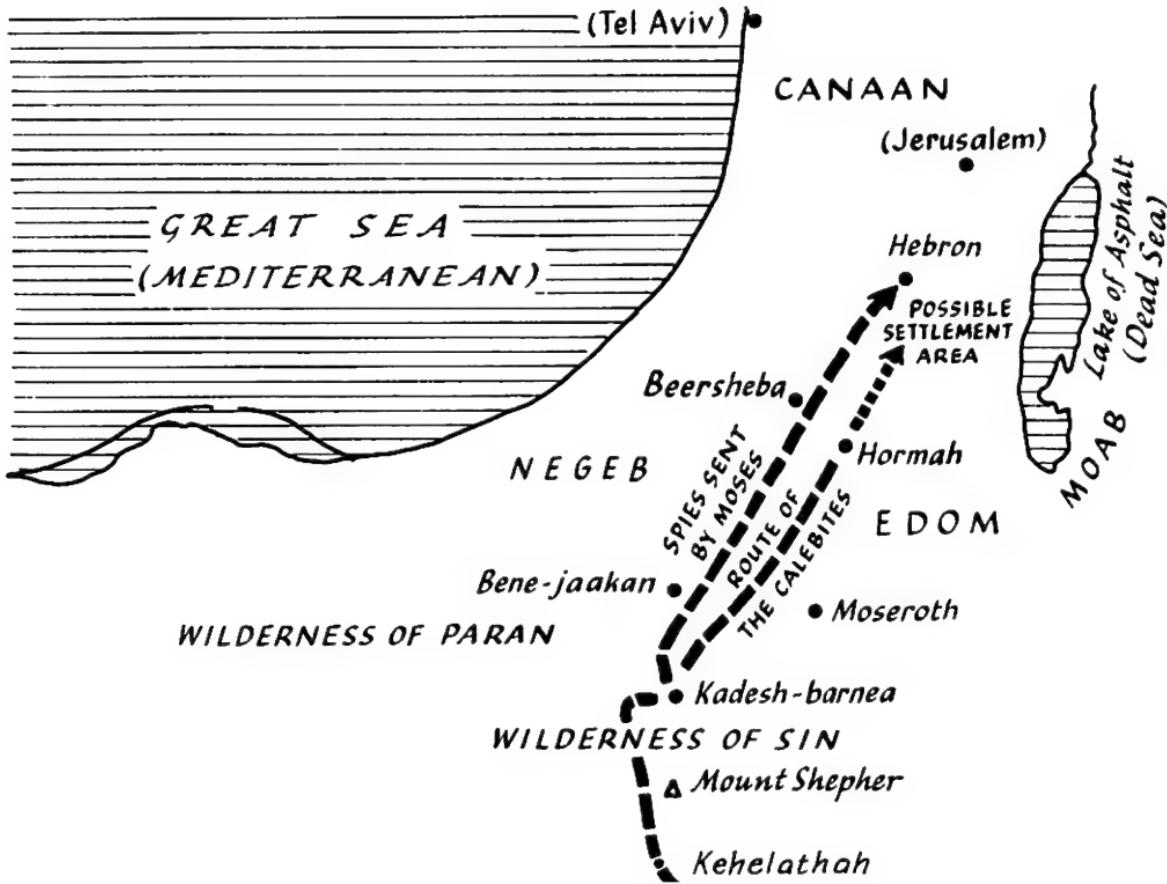
The next halt was at Hazereth (possibly the modern 'Ain Kudrah). The new political organization eased the burden on Moses, but then it was his family which began to cause him annoyance. Aaron and Miriam, his seniors, started to lead a campaign against him. They attacked him indirectly, raising the racial issue against his wife, the Midianite Zipporah who was not an Israelite. She was a

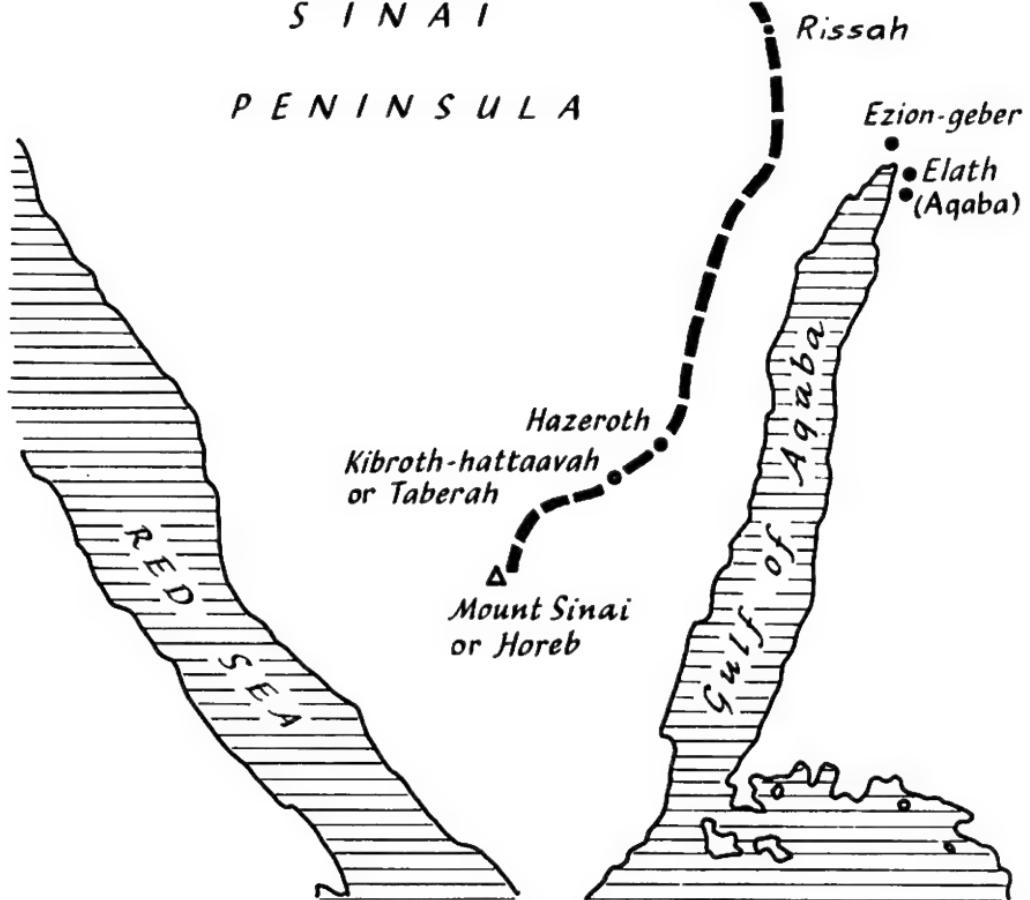
foreigner. Between the lines we can detect the jealous hatred of Miriam, a woman of difficult character, for her sister-in-law a Kushite, a second-class Bedouin woman. It was a quarrel between women, but the Aaron–Miriam trouble did not end there. '*Has Yahweh spoken to Moses only?*' they dared to insinuate. '*Has he not spoken to us too?*' Quite simply it was a family plot whose purpose was clear: they desired to relieve Moses of his office of being the sole prophet, leader of Israel and man of God, and invest his brother and sister-in-law with the supreme power. Yahweh's response was not long in coming: Miriam was struck with leprosy and it required the intervention and prayers of Moses before she was cured.

Between Hazeroth and Kadesh it is a long way and fresh camps had to be established before they reached the oasis which formed the purpose of their journey. One of the chapters of Numbers gives us a list of these camps. The reader will find marked on the map (pp. 138–139) the few points which it has been possible to identify with any certainty, such as Rissah (el-Kuntilla) and Kehelathah. And so they came to the oasis of Kadesh.

Kadesh (Kadesh-barnea, now 'Ain Qadeis) is an attractive oasis situated at the junction of several caravan routes leading from Egypt to Canaan or from Gaza to the oases of Arabia by way of Ezion-geber. At Kadesh were four copious springs feeding several streams on the banks of which grew small acacia trees; it was a site lending itself to cultivation on a small scale, and an obvious centre for the establishment of a sort of federal capital which could become the kernel of the political and religious organization of the Israelites. Moses therefore settled there with the Tabernacle, Yahweh's Dwelling.

The Israelite tribes were scattered about in the wilderness that is called by the Bible sometimes Zin and





sometimes Paran; following their usual life as wandering shepherds they went from pasture to pasture, from well to well, like their ancestors for thousands of years before them. But it seems that these Israelite shepherds took special care to maintain contact with the centre at Kadesh where Moses sat as the supreme judge and representative of Yahweh.

### **Israel tries unsuccessfully to penetrate into Canaan by the south**

This section of the narrative is divided into two parts. First there is an account of the military defeat in accordance with the rather confused explanations provided by the Bible. There follows an attempt to give an historical account which seems more likely in the circumstances.

It seems quite obvious that the base at Kadesh was chosen by Moses on account of its tactical position: the oasis and its region constituted an excellent starting point for an attack on Canaan, for it was only two or three stages away from the Promised Land.

Ordinary prudence required that such an undertaking should not be entered on blindly; it was of supreme importance to discover by reconnaissance what were the prospects for a successful invasion of Canaan. For this purpose Moses sent into the region twelve leaders,<sup>1</sup> one from each tribe, to carry out a thorough investigation. These scouts reconnoitred the land as far as *Rehob, the Pass of Hamoth*,<sup>2</sup> Numbers records (13: 11), a point situated at the extreme north of Palestine. They began their reconnaissance at Hebron in the southern part of

<sup>1</sup> From the tribe of Ephraim Hoshea, son of Nun, was designated; he was already one of Moses' most trusted and active lieutenants. On the occasion of the departure of these envoys Moses changed the name of Hoshea into Joshua ('May Yahweh save!').

<sup>2</sup> Rehob: probably Beth-rehob (Beit-Rohob), near Laish-Dan. The Pass of Hamoth: by this term the scribe probably means to designate the valley of Coele-Syria in the north between Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon.

## The Long Halt at Kadesh

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Canaan. It is this last piece of information that should be borne in mind: Hebron is something like a hundred miles from their starting-point, a convenient distance from which to plan a local military action.

After a long absence (designated by the usual period of 'forty days') the group of scouts returned to Kadesh, where they made their report and showed the produce of the country. But they differed among themselves in the conclusions to be drawn from their expedition.

In the view of some of them an attack on Canaan would be sheer madness. They acknowledged the richness of the country which did indeed *flow with milk and honey*, but they had been able to observe that the men there were formidable, real giants, before whom the Israelites would be like grasshoppers. In addition the country bristled with enormous fortifications with very high walls.

Among those who had returned from the reconnaissance there were two who by no means shared the views of their companions; Joshua and Caleb spoke strongly against the exaggerations of the ten others and as a sign of their protestation against these pessimistic statements they publicly tore their garments. '*The land we went to reconnoitre is a good land, an excellent land. If Yahweh is pleased with us, he will lead us into this land and give it to us.*' But the people began to talk of stoning them.

The narrative now assumes the epic form in conformity with the literary style of the story-tellers. '*How long will this people insult me?*' Yahweh asked his servant Moses. '*How long will they refuse to believe in me?*' Outraged, he spoke of destroying this 'stiff-necked' people. He had made up his mind to disown them; Moses would become his son and of him he would make a new nation.

Moses prostrated himself on the ground and once more implored Yahweh in favour of his faithless people. In the

end, but with great difficulty, Moses was successful. The divine anger was not entirely appeased, nonetheless, as the following speech shows: '*All the men who have seen my glory,' said Yahweh, 'and the signs that I worked in Egypt and in the wilderness, who have put me to the test ten times already and not obeyed my voice, not one shall see the land I swore to give to their fathers. . . . In this wilderness your dead bodies will fall, all you men of the census,<sup>3</sup> all you who were numbered from the age of twenty years and over, you who have complained against me. . . . As for you your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. . . . For forty days you reconnoitred the land. Each day shall count for a year; for forty years you shall bear the burden of your sins, and you shall learn what it means to reject me.'*

Joshua and Caleb, the only two leaders prepared to carry out the invasion plan called for by Yahweh, would one day enter the Promised Land. The ten other leaders who had turned the people away from this plan *were all struck dead by Yahweh.*

'Tomorrow,' Yahweh curtly ordered, in the obviously epic style and spirit of the narrative, '*you will turn about and go back into the wilderness, in the direction of the Sea of Suph*' [the Red Sea].

There follows a somewhat curious episode (Numb. 14: 39–45). On one day the Israelite military forces refused to set off to attack Canaan. On the next, in the face of Yahweh's reproaches, and despite the fresh instructions ordering them to make their way to the south, the Israelites decided to attack the enemy – the Amalekites and Canaanites – with a firm intention of settling accounts with these peoples.

Moses, the Bible tells us, tried to restrain them. '*Why*

<sup>3</sup> This is an allusion to the census of the men able to bear arms which was taken soon after the arrival at Sinai.

*disobey the command of Yahweh?' he demanded. And he warned them, 'Nothing will come of it. . . . You will fall to their swords because you have turned away from Yahweh, and Yahweh is not with you.'*

Moses, of course, refrained from following the mad-men in the foolish adventure. He and the ark of the Covenant did not leave the camp at Kadesh. The armed column which had rushed so foolishly into battle suffered, as was to be expected, a severe defeat. They were pushed back and harried all the way to Hormah.

It is difficult to fit this scene into the epic. It seems possible, however, to attempt an historical explanation if the chapter (Numb. 14) in which the rebellion against Moses is related is read in conjunction with the chapter entitled 'the waters of Meribah' (Numb. 20). The two separate episodes – abandonment of the campaign in the south of Palestine; the punishment of Moses – are rather difficult to grasp when they are read separately, but directly they are set side by side they shed light on each in an unexpected manner.

### **The waters of Meribah; the 'sin' of Moses (Numb. 20)**

At Meribah, a pastoral centre of the desert of Zin in the neighbourhood of Kadesh, the shepherds complained bitterly to Moses because the wells were dried up. It was always the same refrain. '*Why did you bring the assembly of Yahweh into this wilderness, only to let us die there, ourselves and our cattle? Why did you lead us out of Egypt, only to bring us to this wretched place?*' Yahweh, to whom Moses turned for help and protection, ordered him to take his staff, call the assembly together and in their presence, after ordering the rock to give water, to strike it with the staff and water would flow out. Moses therefore assembled the shepherds to reprimand them: '*Listen now, you rebels. Shall we make water gush from*

*this rock for you?' And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with the staff; water gushed in abundance; and the community drank and their cattle too.* So far the elements of the story hang together quite normally, though they are in the epic form in which the whole narrative is couched.

The story continues: *Then Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe that I could proclaim my holiness in the eyes of the sons of Israel, you shall not lead this assembly into the land I am giving them'*. In other words, the two brothers were informed that they would not enter the Promised Land; Yahweh warned them that they would die in the wilderness. Was this because Moses had struck the rock twice instead of once?

For a long time it was thought this twofold blow upon the rock showed a lack of faith on the part of Moses. A careful reading of the episode shows that Moses obeyed without any hesitation at all, perhaps even with ill-tempered haste. A verse in the psalms (Ps. 106: 32–3) is illuminating on this point:

*They enraged him at the waters of Meribah;  
as a result things went wrong for Moses,  
since they had embittered his spirit  
and he spoke without stopping to think.*

And yet in several chapters of the Bible when the water of Meribah are mentioned we find Yahweh reproaching Moses severely: '*You [that is, Moses and Aaron] disobeyed my order at the waters of Meribah*' (Numb. 20: 24); '*You broke faith with me . . . at Meribath-kadesh*' (Deut. 32: 51). And here is the real meaning of the punishment: '*Because you did not believe that I could proclaim my holiness in the eyes of the sons of Israel, you shall not lead this assembly into the land I am*

*giving them'. Thus for the 'sin' committed at the waters of Meribah the Israelites were condemned to wander for forty years in the desert. The whole generation of Israelites born in Egypt were to die in the peninsula; only those among them who were born on the steppes of Sinai were to have the joy of entering Canaan at a later date. Moses himself never entered the Promised Land; he was only allowed to gaze on it from afar before breathing his last. It was a terrible punishment as far as Moses was concerned and one which seems out of proportion with the sin.*

### An attempted explanation

In reality Moses' sin was the abandonment of the plan of a direct campaign against Canaan from the south. At the first reaction of the nomads of the Negeb, unwilling to let the Israelite invaders through, the majority of the latter gave way. Moses was not energetic enough in taking his troops in hand; he did not dare return to the offensive. By re-reading Chapter 15 of Numbers and the beginning of Chapter 20, and especially, by referring to the far more explicit passage of Deuteronomy (1: 29–32) we find a satisfactory explanation of the whole situation; the 'sin' of Moses, formerly regarded as mysterious, now appears as an obvious historical fact.

Before the battle Yahweh assured his people of the assistance that he would give them during it when they came to grips with the peoples of the south of the future Palestine. '*Do not take fright, do not be afraid of them. Yahweh your God goes in front of you and will be fighting on your side.*'

After the too hasty retreat of the Israelites Yahweh's reproaches are easy enough to understand: '*But for all this, you put not your faith in Yahweh your God.*' That was the sin of Moses.

And the punishment was well deserved: '*You shall not enter the land where I swore most solemnly, to settle you.*' And Moses too: '*You shall not lead this assembly into the land I am giving them.*' We are now in a position to understand this punishment better; it is no question of punishing a prophet who struck the rock twice, but of punishing the envoy who had weakened in his duty as a leader of men as a result of an obvious lack of faith.

Two men were excepted from the general punishment by Yahweh: Joshua, who, as we have already seen, spoke out vehemently against those defeatists who were unwilling to fight against the Canaanites; and Caleb, son of Jephunneh, of whom Yahweh said '*because he has obeyed me perfectly, I will bring him into the land he has entered.*'

Some Israelite clans, we can be fairly certain – Kenites, Kenizzites under Caleb's leadership, Jerahmeelites – took advantage of these first encounters with the Canaanites to push on as far as Hormah where they settled. A little later these groups gradually made their way northwards and pitched their tents in the Negeb. We shall encounter them again when the Israelites, having entered Canaan by way of Jericho under Joshua's leadership, were fighting in the southern provinces. But these successes were exceptional. The general body of Israelites fell back on Kadesh. Some scholars hold that the Hebrews who settled in the southern provinces were clans who had remained in Canaan during the whole period when the majority of the people were in Egypt.

It may be wondered why the Bible is so far from explicit about all this. With some show of reason commentators think that in the circumstances the scribe tried to tone down an episode that was unfavourable to Moses' memory.

## The Long Halt at Kadesh

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### Miriam's death (Numb. 20)

Miriam, Moses' ambitious and somewhat dominating sister, died at Kadesh shortly after the defeat on the southern frontier of Canaan. She deserves gratitude for having contrived the clever plan by which she saved the life of her small brother, the future Moses. But after that she was instrumental in causing her brother serious embarrassment. She was laid in the grave and no more is heard of her.

### The rebellion of Korah the Levite (Numb. 16)

It is difficult to place this chapter in its right order chronologically. But it does not really matter. What is of importance in the epic is the ill-will of the Levites who, eaten up with ambition openly rebelled against the priestly prerogatives granted by Moses to Aaron and his family. Although Korah was Moses' cousin he was nonetheless the instigator of a revolt which quickly became ugly. In the presence of Moses and Aaron, his high priest, Korah and his followers put forward their complaints arrogantly: '*You take too much on yourselves! The whole community and all its members are consecrated, and Yahweh lives among them. Why set yourselves higher than the community of Yahweh?*' As was explained above, the Levites were not priests; they were merely responsible for service in the Tabernacle, and now they were *aspiring to the office of the priesthood as well.*<sup>4</sup> The whole affair ended in a way characteristic of this type of epic literature: Yahweh was summoned very properly to give judgement; the earth opened and swallowed up the

<sup>4</sup> In fact the account of Korah's rebellion combines two overlapping narratives and this makes the passage far from clear. On the one hand we have an account (Yahwistic tradition) of the political rebellion of Dathan, Abiram and On, all of the tribe of Reuben; on the other, there is an account (Priestly tradition) of the religious rivalry between branches of the tribe descended from Levi – the Kohathites (Korah and his supporters) and the Aaronites (Aaron and his two surviving sons).

chief culprits and all Korah's accomplices were consumed by fire which came down from heaven.

Kadesh formed a long interlude for the tribes on the northern steppes of the Sinai peninsula. They were there for about thirty-eight years if we accept without too many reservations the figure of 'forty years in the wilderness'.

## MARCHES AND COUNTER-MARCHES

Moses seems to have been well aware of the mediocre quality, to say the least, of his army. His men thought only of returning to Egypt to continue their lives there as stock-breeders and farmers. They forgot about the forced labour and thought only of going back to the gardens on the banks of the Nile. Moses' plan remained very simple and realistic; for the time being they were to remain in the wilderness until the unwarlike generation was dead, for with them there could be no question of attempting the conquest of Canaan. In addition, of course, the youthful members of the tribes needed to prepare for the holy war awaiting them. They were continually reminded that this land was theirs; Yahweh had promised it to them on oath; they could and ought to consider it as their property. Israel's lawgiver assured them of their coming victory over its inhabitants. Under these conditions they were eager to rush into battle for it, for this land in which flowed milk and honey soon came to appear to them as their prize and a far more attractive place to live than the plains of Sinai where they moved from one camp to another.

Gradually a strange revolution occurred in the mental attitude of the Israelites. While those of them who had

been led out of Egypt by Moses looked forward to returning to their peaceful existence in their tents on the Delta, the younger generations were eager for battle. These nomad shepherds could already imagine themselves established as settled residents, and, of course, as the masters in the land of the patriarchs.

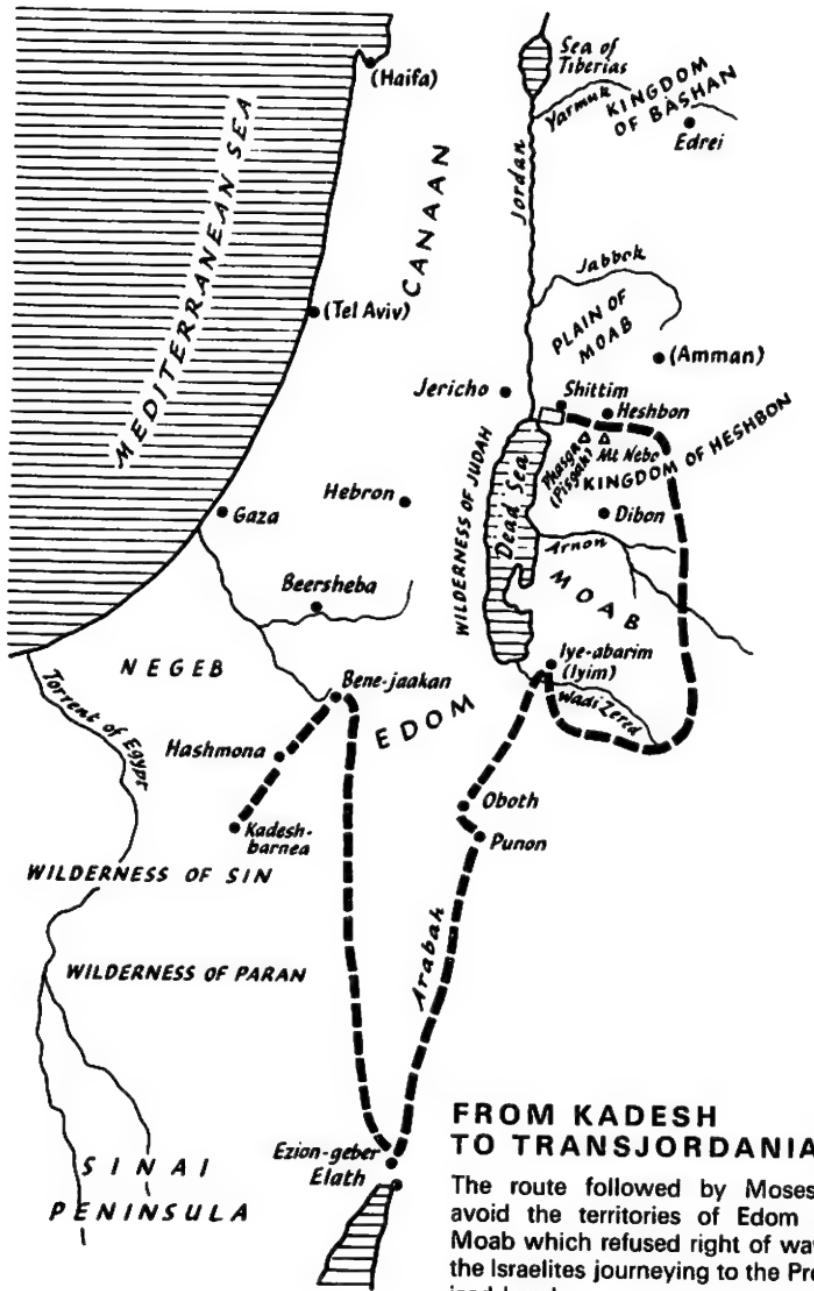
That does not mean, of course, that as they moved about Moses did not encounter serious difficulties with these capricious people. It is true, nonetheless, that on the matter of war their whole spirit had changed. Moses had now at his disposal a force that enabled him to envisage going over to the offensive.

Kadesh was a long and distressing experience. But the arduous life as shepherds had put the Israelites in fighting trim. And Moses, for his part, with his theology, the rules of morality that he laid down and the customary law which he was continually enacting, succeeded in endowing Israel with a national spirit. The time for action was drawing near. The question remained, however, at what point were they to make contact with the enemy?

Logically, it seemed obvious that they should march straight north towards Beersheba which was hardly fifty miles distant from Kadesh. Moses seems to have decided against this course. His decision can easily be explained. At this period Rameses III sent out expeditions from time to time to disperse the waves of the invading Peoples of the Sea; it is easy to understand, therefore, that Moses was not anxious to take this route of the Philistines for fear of meeting contingents of Egyptians.

**Edom refuses right of way to Israel (Deut. 11:3, Numb. 20: 14–21; 33: 37)**

The Israelites could also reach the land of Canaan by crossing Mount Seir to the south-west of the Dead Sea;



### FROM KADESH TO TRANSJORDANIA

The route followed by Moses to avoid the territories of Edom and Moab which refused right of way to the Israelites journeying to the Promised Land.

Seir was in the territory of Edom. At the time of Moses, the Edomites, Esau's descendants, were still feeding their flocks in this rather wild country in which, nevertheless, they had managed to cultivate some of the land. Yahweh had formally forbidden Moses to attack this sister people; he therefore sent ambassadors to the king of Edom asking permission to pass through his land. '*We will not cross any fields or vineyards,*' the Israelite delegation explained. '*We will not drink any water from the wells; we will keep to the king's highway without turning to the right or left until we are clear of your frontiers*' (that is, until reaching Canaan). '*You shall not pass through my country,*' replied the king of Edom. Moses insisted: '*We will keep to the high road; if we use any of your water for myself and my cattle, I will pay for it.*' It was useless. '*You shall not pass,*' reiterated the king.

While these negotiations were going on the Israelites had begun to move north-west straight towards Edom. They established their camp at Moseroth, not far from Mount Hor, where a dramatic incident took place. At Yahweh's command, Moses, with Aaron and Eleazar, the elder of Aaron's two remaining sons, took the path up the mountain; for as a punishment for his mysterious sin, mentioned above, Aaron was not to enter the Promised Land but to leave his bones in the desert. There, on the mountain, Moses stripped Aaron of his ritual vestments and vested Eleazar in them; he it was who now became the high-priest of Israel. After this strange ceremony *Aaron died there on top of the mountain.* For a whole month the Israelites wept for Aaron.

The important part of the narrative is the request made by Israel to Edom and the unbrotherly refusal of the Edomites. It is hardly surprising if, subsequently, at the time of the Judges and the Kings, they were regarded by

the Israelites as enemies to be treated without any consideration at all. Or possibly the later enmity between Edom and Israel has been incorporated by the story-tellers into the epic of the journey through the wilderness. The Edomites assisted the Babylonians when they destroyed Jerusalem.

As a result of the Edomites refusal the Israelites turned their backs on the Promised Land and set off south. They halted at Bene-jaakan, then went on by way of Hashmonah and Kadesh. After a further halt at Hor-haggidgad they set out again straight towards Ezion-geber near the extreme point of the Gulf of Aqaba, an extension of the Sea of Reeds (see map, p. 151). In this way they avoided the land of Edom. They went back up the terrible valley of Arabah in an attempt to reach the borders of Canaan by passing round the eastern end of the Dead Sea.

Arabah is a forlorn region, an absolute wilderness, a real valley of death; parts of it are covered by drifting sand and others consist of vast stony expanses. The Israelites advanced over this wilderness in which there were scarcely any wells. Progress became extremely difficult and the people, who did not understand very clearly the political and strategic reasons for all these marches and counter-marches, began to show their impatience, their discontent and, finally, their anger. The biblical writer, with his theological outlook, explained the poisonous snakes, from which the Israelites suffered, as a punishment. These snakes were probably horned vipers which are very dangerous and abound in this unfriendly country.

It appears that in the circumstances the oriental imagination likened these 'fiery serpents' to the winged dragons of Assyrian mythology and Semitic legend. In any case the people, imbued with ideas of magic, asked

Moses to make them a talisman to protect them and to cure them from the bite of the snakes. 'Make us a fiery serpent,' implored the crowd, and put it on a standard [in fact, a sort of pole]. *If anyone is bitten and looks at it, he shall live.* Rather surprisingly Moses granted their request; he ordered the famous *seraph* or bronze serpent<sup>1</sup> to be made and it now accompanied the caravan. At the end of this long and desolate gorge the Israelites emerged on the frontiers of Moab.

### **Israel forbidden to attack Moab and Ammon**

Owing to Edom's refusal to let the Israelites pass through the country it seemed obvious that they had now to proceed along the eastern shores of the Dead Sea and attempt to penetrate into Canaan by fording the Jordan at a lower part of the river near its mouth. But the territory to the east of the Dead Sea was occupied by the Moabites. Moab, the eponymous ancestor of this tribe, was a son of Lot, Abraham's nephew. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Yahweh gave Moses strict orders not to attack these peoples since they were blood relations.

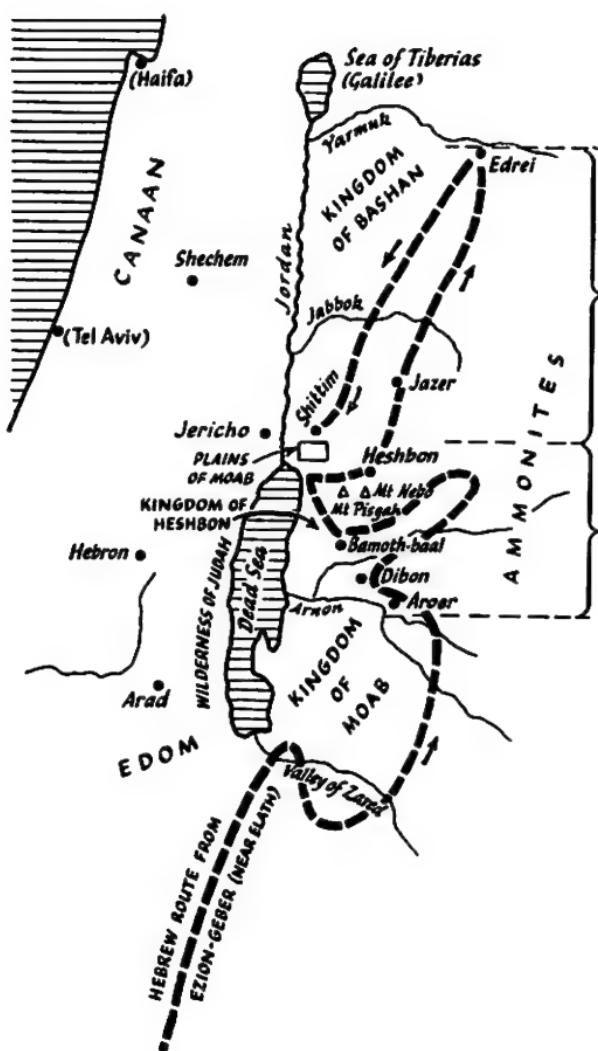
This entailed a further detour towards the east. If they continued like this they would never reach the Promised Land. '*Forward, then!*' commanded Yahweh, allowing no argument. '*Cross the Wadi Zered!*'

A little further on Yahweh ordered: '*Break camp, set out and cross the Wadi Arnon.*'

### **Israel at last goes over to the offensive**

Between the Arnon and the Jabbok, that is in Trans-

<sup>1</sup> Later on this strange emblem was placed in the Temple at Jerusalem where it was venerated, though not without suspicion of magic. During the campaign against idols Hezekiah, king of Judah (716–688), who broke the Canaanite steles and tore down the sacred poles on the 'high places', smashed the bronze serpent (2 Kings, 18: 4) although it was regarded as being 'made by Moses'.



### 2nd campaign of Moses

by their victory over Og, King of Bashan, the Hebrews annexed all the territory within the rivers Jabbok (to the south) and Yarmuk (to the north)

### 1st campaign of Moses

by their victory over Sihon, King of Heshbon, the Hebrews annexed all the territory within the rivers Arnon (to the south) and Jabbok (to the north)

## MOSES' CAMPAIGNS IN TRANSJORDANIA

After going round the kingdoms of Edom and Moab (two sister peoples whom Moses did not wish to attack) the Israelites arrived in Transjordan (left bank of the Jordan). In two rapid campaigns they seized  
 the kingdom of Heshbon  
 the kingdom of Bashan

The Israelites thus possessed a base from which to make ready for the attack on Canaan (the Promised Land).

jordania (to the east of the Dead Sea and the Jordan) stood the powerful Amorite kingdom, governed by Sihon, king of Heshbon. Fortunately he was no relation to the Israelites and, better still, he had just dispossessed their Moabite cousins of a large part of their country. There was therefore no reason at all to spare him.

In two rapid campaigns (more easily followed on the map than by a long description, see p. 155) Moses obtained possession to the east of the Jordan of an immense territory which was to serve as a base for the Israelite attack on Canaan. After the rapid conquest of the kingdom of Heshbon, and by seizing the fertile land of Bashan belonging to King Og, the Hebrews found themselves in possession of the area to the east of the Jordan, the region which the Mediterranean geographers of antiquity called Transjordania.

### The story of Balaam (Numb. 22, 23, 24)

After the lightning-like conquest of northern Transjordania we find the Israelites establishing their camp *in the plains of Moab* at the foot of Mount Pisgah. They were thus near the mouth of the Jordan where the river flows into the Dead Sea, and were separated from the Promised Land by the breadth of the river.

It was then that the story about Balaam the soothsayer occurred. Although the writer of Numbers did not hesitate to devote three long chapters to it, this little story, from the historical point of view, is unimportant and had no influence on the course of events. But it furnishes curious and very interesting information on the state of mind of oriental peoples at this period.

Balak, king of Moab, was seized with panic by the massing of the Israelite forces to the north of his territory. Probably he was beginning to fear the consequences of his refusal to allow Moses to traverse his land (Judges 11:

17). Balak assembled the elders of Moab and Midian to examine the situation with them. Before attacking these formidable warriors it was thought that it would be good policy to weaken them by ritual curses.

For the curses to be effective a magician possessing supernatural powers was required in the camp. Balak and his elders knew of one who lived at Pethor on the Euphrates in upper Mesopotamia; his name was Balaam. They decided to send a delegation asking him to come and curse Israel before the battle.<sup>2</sup>

After much hesitation Balaam saddled his she-donkey and set out for Moab. On three occasions the donkey saw standing before her *the angel of Yahweh, a drawn sword in his hand*. But Balaam did not see him. On each occasion the donkey stopped or lay down and Balaam beat her with his stick. Finally *Yahweh opened the mouth of the donkey* and she reproached her master for his treatment of her. '*What have I done to you?*' she asked, '*Why beat me three times like this?*' At this moment Yahweh allowed Balaam to see the angel. After they had spoken together Balaam said that he would go back. Finally, the angel allowed him to continue on his way: '*Go with these men,*' he said, '*but only say what I tell you to say.*' The modern reader who refers to the biblical text will find this a good example of the eastern story-telling art.

And so Balaam arrived at the place. Together with several Moabite leaders Balak ceremoniously led him to Bamoth-baal (heights of Baal), a peak from which the Israelites' camp could be seen in the distance. Seven altars were put up and seven bulls and seven rams were sacrificed. But then to the general astonishment it was

<sup>2</sup> The story here is a little involved; both Yahwistic and Elohistic traditions are combined here and sometimes contradict each other. In addition, the successive interventions of Yahweh with Balaam present problems.

not curses which fell upon the Israelites but words foretelling victory for them and the wonderful destiny awaiting them.

No matter: the Moabites tried somewhere else. Balaam was led to the Field of Spies, towards the summit of Pisgah. Seven altars were built and, as previously, sacrifices were offered to the Moabite gods. Once more Balaam's lips uttered words full of hope and optimism for Balak's enemies. '*Very well!*' exclaimed Balak, '*do not curse them. But at least do not bless them!*'

A further attempt was made on the summit of Mount Peor. This time Balaam exceeded all bounds. It was scarcely surprising that Balak flew into a rage: '*I brought you to curse my enemies, and you bless them three times over! Be off with you, and go home!*'

Before leaving, Balaam, still under Yahweh's inspiration, made a further prophecy calculated to put fear into the heart of Balak and his allies: '*A star from Jacob takes the leadership, a sceptre arises from Israel. It crushes the brows of Moab*' (Numb. 24: 17). Moab, Balaam had declared, would be crushed and also the sons of Sheth (the Bedouin tribes); Edom would be conquered; the posterity of Amalek would perish; the Kenites were to experience the horrors of slavery; Og's kingdom would be invaded by the Sea-people who would also crush Asshur; Eber, too, was to perish for ever. It was a terrible 'prophecy', probably written after the events in question. In any case, *Balaam rose, left and went home.*

*Balak too went his way:* in other words he took good care not to attack the Israelites and prudently remained in his tent.

This story of Balaam, which is difficult to treat historically, discloses for us a very interesting side to Israel's Transjordanian epic; it shows very clearly the general

terror that Moses' troops provoked among all the peoples established to the east of the Jordan.

### **At Peor further apostasy of the people of God**

While Balak and Balaam continued their fruitless exchanges the Israelites were delayed in Transjordania, a circumstance which caused serious wavering in their religious fidelity. On the perfidious advice of Balaam the Moabites had sent some of their daughters~~to~~ to the Israelite camp.

The Israelites had settled down on the plains of Moab. As the herdsmen moved from pasture to pasture they made some rather unexpected discoveries in camps scattered over the plain. In these Midianite camps which they visited as neighbours, and also probably out of a certain curiosity, they experienced the attraction of the sacred prostitutes. This was an entirely novel religious cult to them. They had Yahweh, of course, the one invisible God, reminding them continually by the lips of Moses of the moral and social precept of the Decalogue. But how could these Israelites, straight from the wilderness, resist for long the heady attraction of the old Semitic cults? '*When they reached Baal-peor,*' the prophet Hosea states angrily, '*they devoted themselves to shame and became as hateful as the things they loved*' (9: 10). Many of the Israelite shepherds frequented the Midianite 'high places' where, in the presence of the idols or symbols of the Midianite religion, they took part in the ceremonial meals. They bowed down before the idols of these deities, all of them of sexual implication; the ritual action concluded with an orgy.

A wave of debauchery and immorality swept over the Israelite camp, despite the Decalogue, the code of the Covenant and the social and religious Law.

But Moses saw the danger. He had to act quickly and

energetically. He executed the leaders who had taken part in these abominations, and all the men who had *committed themselves to the Baal of Peor*. Just then a plague (that is, an epidemic, though it is difficult to identify in the present state of knowledge) took a heavy toll of the camp; the people were in no doubt about it; it was a clear manifestation of Yahweh's anger. Mortally afraid, the whole Israelite community assembled before the Tent of Meeting, weeping for their sins and imploring forgiveness of their God.

At this moment a further scandal occurred. Zimri, son of Salu, one of the elders of the house of Simeon, introduced into the Israelite camp one of the sacred Midianite prostitutes, named Cozbi. She was the daughter of Zur, the chief of a Midianite clan. On hearing of this further scandal, Phinehas (the son of Eleazar and therefore Aaron's grandson) seized a lance, burst into the tent where the guilty couple were and ran both *right through the groin*. At once the epidemic raging in the camp came to an end, and through Moses Yahweh announced that Phinehas and his descendants should enjoy the priesthood for ever and have the right to perform the ritual sacrifice of atonement over Israel. Again, we may see in this the influence of the later history of the priesthood.

The time had come to leave this rich land as soon as possible. In any case, on account of its small size, the oasis at the foot of Mount Pisgah was suitable only as a temporary halting place. The time had come to cross over the Jordan and set off on the conquest of the Promised Land.

## MOSES' TESTAMENT AND DEATH

The Israelites, now firmly established at bases in Transjordania, only awaited the order to start on the conquest of Canaan, the Promised Land. Before giving this order, however, Moses considered that a further census of the people was necessary; it was particularly important to be accurately informed about the military contingents available. In addition, he thought that it would be very dangerous to allow certain groups of Midianite shepherds to continue to exist at the rear and on the flanks of the Israelite camps. Their hostility towards the Israelites was well known. So in a rapid campaign the Midianites were crushed and put to the sword; they spared only the women and their young children who were incorporated into the various Israelite tribes. This was a 'holy war', as it was understood by these still very barbarous peoples.

### **On the plains of Moab: Moses' testament**

Moses fully realized that on account of his 'sin' Yahweh had refused to allow him to enter the Promised Land. That did not prevent him making a last desperate request for this favour. But Yahweh was angry at this. '*Enough!*' he said, '*Speak to me no more of this*' (Deut. 3: 23–26). The decision was irrevocable.

*His eye [was] undimmed, emphasizes the scribe, his vigour unimpaired* (Deut. 34: 7). Before dying Moses took advantage of the short period granted to him to complete his stupendous work. He desired to strengthen the spiritual armour of his people further so that they could endure the trials of their historic future. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Moses' last actions on earth revealed him as an indefatigable legislator.<sup>1</sup>

First the literary form taken by the testament of Moses must be examined as it is set out in the Bible. Then, after a critical and objective appraisal, conclusions can be formulated.

### The three great discourses of Moses

These three long discourses can be read in Deuteronomy. In the first discourse, which serves as an introduction to the others, Moses gives a summary of his whole work, or, rather, of the great favours granted by Yahweh to his people after they were freed from slavery in Egypt. The style is poetic, imposing and of sustained power all through.

The second discourse is the most important of the three. In solemn terms Moses goes on to explain the theocratic organization<sup>2</sup> by which Israel was to be ruled. The

<sup>1</sup> It is worthwhile drawing attention here to Abbé Steinmann's attractive thesis; he argues convincingly that Moses' legislative activity can be divided as follows:

1. On Sinai, the ritual decalogue of Exod. 34; and also the fragments of the ritual decalogue of Exod. 23: 10–19.
2. At Kadesh, the greater part of the Code of the Covenant (Exod. 21–23). Here it was a matter of adapting an old code of customary law of ancient Semitic origin; Moses adapted it to the life of Israelite shepherds on the plain.
3. On the plains of Moab Moses promulgated a certain number of penal laws (inserted in the Code of the Covenant) and the Decalogue.

<sup>2</sup> Theocracy: the word was introduced by the historian Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37–95) to explain to the Romans, his contemporaries, the original character of the politico-religious organization of the Israelites. 'The forms of government introduced by some legislators,' he observes, 'have sometimes been monarchies, sometimes oligarchies and sometimes democracies. But our legislator [Moses] established none of these institutes. He wished our government to be what could be called a "theocracy", for he attributed the authority and power to God' (*Contra Apion.* 2, 17).

## Moses' Testament and Death

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Israelites owed entire obedience to Yahweh. The only Law to be observed was that of the Decalogue, as expanded in the different Codes of the Covenant and the whole legal system.

The third discourse, which is fairly short, is very expressive. It deals with the official renewal of the Covenant: the contract, previously drawn up at the foot of Sinai, was to be publicly ratified.

This collection of laws, carefully recorded in writing, was laid by Moses before the ark of the Covenant. From then on it was also called the ark of Witness, because the Mosaic code placed near the ark would serve on occasion as 'witness', when Israel broke the Law (Deut. 31: 26). Inside the ark were the tablets of stone on which were inscribed the 'Ten Words', the basic text. Outside the ark, against its side, lay the juridical norms which explained, clarified and interpreted the Decalogue.

In conclusion, Moses installed as supreme leader of Israel the Ephraimite warrior Joshua, who for some time past had functioned as Moses' lieutenant.

### Deuteronomy and the historian

Nowadays, the historical existence of Moses, the leader of the Israelites during their Exodus, is, practically speaking, no longer contested, at least among objective historians. Quite obviously, it required a powerful leader of great energy to bring Israel out of Egypt, fashion its character, endow it with legislation that is without equal and launch it on the road to conquest.

Does that mean that these extraordinary discourses reproduced in Deuteronomy, together with the long piece of poetry, provide us with an authentic account of Moses' activities on *the fields of Moab* and soon afterwards on Mount Nebo (the mountain where he died)? At first

sight it is tempting to give a negative answer and a rapid comparison of the relevant dates will probably encourage such a conclusion.

Moses' activity in the Sinai wilderness occurred about 1260–1230 B.C. and we now know that the text of Deuteronomy dates from the seventh and sixth centuries. In addition, the eloquence which the scribe puts in Moses' mouth is certainly far too literary in flavour, especially when it is remembered that at the Burning Bush Moses tried to decline the mission which Yahweh laid upon him by pleading that he was *a man slow of speech*, that is, one essentially unfitted to make a speech. Yet we have here some of the finest passages of the Pentateuch. There are powerful images, a vivid style, imposing descriptions with, on occasion, a certain verbal redundancy. There is no need to be an orientalist: even through a translation we can make contact with the author, a man of letters.

Hebrew scholars have recognized, in fact, that Deuteronomy, as we have it at the present day, is only the final version of several previous accounts whose date goes back to much earlier centuries. In the present text have been found archaic turns of phrase, very ancient syntactical forms and, here and there, evidence of a primitive mentality. Some biblical scholars think that a first version of Deuteronomy may have been written in about 700 B.C. and this must have taken its information from previous versions fairly near to the Mosaic period itself.

It should be added, of course, that each generation of theologians and jurists edited and expanded these primitive accounts in his own way, either to enable them to be understood by the people or to bring them into harmony with social conditions. On Sinai the Code was drawn up for nomad shepherds; after the Israelites

settled in the Promised Land this old legislation for a wandering, pastoral people required adaptation to an agricultural civilization and to those who were settled residents.

This rapid account will have shown some of the difficulties of the historian. The text that we are examining cannot be termed apocryphal, far from it. But the relation of the facts, entirely authentic fundamentally, has been retouched and embellished by successive writers who, despite the additions made to the primitive version, have made an effort to preserve the essential spirit of the message of Moses. Thus Deuteronomy remains for us a most valuable document; despite its composite character it enables us indirectly to make contact with Moses' social and legislative activity on the banks of the Jordan.

The following is a short summary of the principal points emphasized by Moses before his death.

There was the implicit proclamation of a theocracy. Henceforward, Israel was no longer to be a community governed by a human will. It was to be Yahweh himself who was the leader of this society. The Law had been given to the Israelites by Yahweh. The priests would continue to guide the Israelites according to the Ten Words interpreted by the whole corpus of Mosaic codes (Torah).

Moses also spoke of safeguarding the religious community, the necessity of not forgetting God, of loving the Law and of loving the brethren.

Finally there was the safeguarding of Israel's religion. When the people were established in Canaan they were to have nothing to do with the worshippers of the Baals, the false gods, and the introduction of Canaanite wives into Israelite families was to be forbidden. The altars and high places where the deities of the inhabitants of this country were adored were to be destroyed.

### Death of Moses on Mount Nebo (about 1225 B.C.)

Yahweh had revealed to Moses that the hour of his death was near. He was to climb the slopes of Mount Nebo, for it was there that he was to die (Deut. 34).

Before carrying out Yahweh's order Moses gave his blessing, in accordance with the ancient Semitic tradition, on the sons of Israel. In the preceding volume dealing with Jacob the scene when he pronounced the 'oracles' on his death bed was described (p. 166). We shall probably be right in thinking that the 'oracles of Jacob' is a literary transposition in accordance with the usual practice of the eastern scribes. The same may also be said of the blessings of Moses. As with Jacob's pronouncements the details furnished by the prophecies of Moses are of indubitable interest for the historian. There is a whole body of information which will be useful for us when we come to follow the establishment of the various tribes and their place on the map of Palestine.

*Then leaving the plains of Moab, Moses went up Mount Nebo, the peak of Pisgah, opposite Jericho.*

Mount Nebo is a peak (2740 feet) belonging to the Abarim range which runs along the north-east shore of the Dead Sea. On leaving the plains of Moab there is a gradual ascent to this observation point from which a very wide view may be obtained, the view described in Deuteronomy: *And Yahweh showed him the whole land; Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western sea [the Mediterranean], the Negeb, and the stretch of the Valley of Jericho, city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. Yahweh said to him, 'This is the land I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying: I will give it to your descendants. I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross into it.' There in the land of Moab, Moses the servant of Yahweh died as Yahweh decreed;*

## Moses' Testament and Death

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*he [other versions read 'they'] buried him in the valley, in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but to this day no one has ever found his grave. . . . The sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days (a late legend repeated in the Epistle of St Jude, verse 9).*

### Moses, a final estimate

He could be called the 'liberator of Israel' in the first place, if we take his activities in their chronological order. To him belongs the entire responsibility for this Exodus; it was a very dangerous undertaking which, on a final analysis saved the small community from almost certain extinction.

He might be termed the creator of the Chosen People, for in fact Moses acted as the catalysing agent of the people of Israel. He led out of Egypt a few Aramean tribes who claimed a common ancestor, Abraham, and worshipped, though with declining fervour, a tribal God called by them 'El, El 'Elohim or 'El-Shaddai, and also Yahweh.

From these heterogeneous ethnical elements, to which were joined bands of Asiatic slaves who also desired to flee from Egypt and forced labour, Moses succeeded in making a people, a living clay which was worked on and moulded by the hands of this leader of genius. Moses bound these people together by a common bond in the religion and the Law of Yahweh, and it was this religious cohesion and unity in belief which enabled Israel to obtain spiritual, political and even military supremacy over the inhabitants of Palestine.

He was also 'the prophet of Yahweh', or rather a 'super-prophet', we might say, remembering the dictum of Deuteronomy, *Never has there been such a prophet of Israel as Moses* (34: 10). He is shown to us as Yahweh's intimate; he sees Yahweh 'face to face' (an explanation

of this phrase has already been given); hence, at the beginning of some chapters, *Yahweh said to Moses, Yahweh spoke to Moses and said to him.* Yahweh gave expression to his will through Moses, his servant.

What then was the burden of his message, what was Moses' fundamental inspiration? His theological affirmation was made up of a threefold message: Yahweh is the only God (of the tribe of Jacob); Yahweh is the only holy God; Yahweh has made of Israel his Chosen People, destined to bear his message.

*The continual mediator between Yahweh and his people.* Both Rabbinical and Christian tradition agree in recognition of the role of mediator assigned to Moses in the history of salvation. At every moment, it can be said, we see Moses' intervention in the close relationship between Yahweh and the Chosen People — he transmitted the Law to Israel, he explained it, he taught the Israelites how it had to be kept. At each of Israel's transgressions he interceded with Yahweh to obtain the pardon of the guilty people. Sometimes he even went so far as to argue heatedly with Yahweh who, in his 'anger', declared that he was about to bring to an end the spiritual experiment with this 'hot-headed people'.

Not only did Moses suffer with Israel, but he desired to share the sufferings of Israel; and by sharing in the suffering he desired to give it, it is clear, an expiatory character. From the very beginning of his mission he appeared as a 'person of suffering'. His whole existence may be seen as a continual sacrifice and his death forms a worthy conclusion to this life of sacrifice.

**The lawgiver of Israel.** The 'Ten Words' inscribed on the stone tablets, which Moses brought down from the heights of Sinai, still remain as the moral expression in which humanity in its continual evolution recognizes the evidence of the truth.

## Moses' Testament and Death

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The founder of Yahwehism. Lastly, by the first body of laws in which the social and religious formed one inseparable entity Moses appears as the authentic founder of Yahwehism. By this term is meant not a new belief, but a natural and indispensable evolution of the revelation made to Abraham, which is perfectly integrated into the progressive framework of the Old Testament.

By his life, work and death Moses appears, on a last analysis, as the key personality at one of the most important moments – and there are not a great number of them – of the spiritual history of humanity.

## JOSHUA ESTABLISHES ISRAEL IN THE PROMISED LAND

Joshua appeared in history for the first time at Rephidim; the Israelites had just left Egypt under Moses' leadership and were on their way to Sinai. At that moment they were unexpectedly attacked by the Amalekites. Joshua, at the head of the Israelite men at arms, won a brilliant victory over these formidable brigands.

Later on, there was his fierce opposition right at the beginning of the sojourn at Kadesh when almost all the men sent to Canaan exaggerated the difficulties of penetrating into enemy country and strongly advised against any attack. Joshua had spoken strongly against this cowardly attitude which, in addition, took no account of Yahweh's orders. On this occasion Moses decided to change the name of his dynamic lieutenant. Hoshea, as he had formerly been called, was henceforth to be called Jehoshua (Yahweh is my salvation), of which we have made Joshua. Directly Moses was informed of his approaching death he hastened to designate Joshua as his successor. In the presence of the people and the high priest Eleazar he laid hands upon him. From then on Joshua appeared as the military and political leader of Israel.

Moses had just died. Carrying out the plan bequeathed



When Moses the servant of Yahweh was dead, Yahweh spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' adjutant. He said, 'Moses my servant is dead; rise—it is time—and cross the Jordan here, you and all this people with you, into the land which I am giving the sons of Israel. Every place you tread with the soles of your feet I shall give you as I declared to Moses . . . I will be with you as I was with Moses; I will not leave you or desert you.'

Josh. 1: 1-5

to him Joshua set to work; he made all arrangements for crossing the Jordan and starting on the conquest of the Promised Land.

### The various populations found by the Israelites in Canaan

For a thousand years and more – from 2500 until 1200 – the land into which the Israelites were to penetrate under Joshua's leadership suffered many waves of invasion. The following is a summary list.

1. In about 2500 occurred the great Canaanite invasion. They were Semites who left a profound mark on the country to which they gave its first geographical name, the land of Canaan.

2. In about 1800 B.C. (half a century before the arrival of Abraham) there was a further and massive invasion of Semites, probably people related by blood to the Canaanites. The two peoples merged quite quickly since they were of similar origins and mentality.

3. After these two principal Semitic invasions there began a series of infiltrations of tribes which did not belong to the Semitic group, namely:

(a) between 1800 and 1600 the Hyksos arrived with their chariots; at various strategic points they built their huge citadels and imposed on the country a feudal civilization;

(b) at the end of the fourteenth century (a century before the arrival of Moses and the Israelites on Sinai) the Hittites appeared. These, too, were non-Semites. They came from the centre of Asia where they had previously established a formidable military state; they settled here and there in Canaan in small colonies, choosing regions that were not yet occupied;

(c) lastly, in about 1200, occurred the arrival of the Philistines or Peoples of the Sea. Hordes of these well-

armed conquerors arrived, probably from Crete; but they seem to have also recruited adventurers from the Greek Isles, the coasts of the Aegean Sea and from different regions of the eastern Mediterranean.

The population of Canaan, it will be seen, was made up of very varied elements. Nevertheless, all these groups (the Philistines apart, at least for the time being) were in time absorbed by the old Canaanite stock.

### **Favourable and unfavourable factors for the Israelite conquest of Canaan**

At the beginning of the twelfth century (1200–1175) when the Israelites began to penetrate into Canaan, they appeared to be on the one hand in an advantageous position since the territory had practically been freed from foreign domination; on the other hand, there was cause for anxiety in that the country bristled with impenetrable citadels. Both points merit further consideration.

In the first place we can examine the political situation. Hitherto, it had been difficult for an independent State to be established in the corridor situated between Jordan and the Mediterranean; sometimes one of the Mesopotamian powers annexed this small territory as an obvious bastion against attacks from Egypt; and sometimes Egypt, victorious over the Asiatic peoples of the north-east, used Palestine as a buffer to guarantee the valley of the Nile against invasions from Mesopotamia.

At the period in question the Hittites (the only ones worthy of consideration at the time) had just been vanquished by the powerful Rameses III. On the other hand, the Egyptians themselves had sustained heavy blows from the repeated attacks of the Peoples of the Sea; these latter had been pushed back but the military effort required of the Egyptian troops had been very

considerable and they needed to withdraw within their own borders for the time being.

The result of all this was the weakening of the two opposing military powers; the land of Canaan was momentarily freed from occupation or, rather, from the domination of foreign nations. The Israelites were able to profit by these favourable political conditions.

On the other hand, as was pointed out above, the military situation gave cause for considerable anxiety. At the time when the Israelites were about to attack Canaan the country presented the curious feudal appearance imposed on it by the Hyksos. A military aristocracy not unlike that which existed in the West during the Middle Ages had erected huge fortresses on the summits of the steep slopes and cliffs.

All this would be formidable for the Israelites with their rather primitive arms. How, under these conditions, were they to attack the high walls of these well-defended citadels? And on the plains, how could they offer effective resistance to the quick-moving chariots?

### Preliminary restatement of the historical question

If we keep to the general historical pattern as shown in Numbers, Deuteronomy and the Book of Joshua, the conquest of Canaan appears to have been effected with lightning-like rapidity and to have been complete. Under the protection of Yahweh and on his orders (this strange, barbarous and unacceptable concept of a holy war will be explained shortly), Israel fell like an eagle on its prey. Everywhere the Israelites won resounding victories; we find them taking powerfully fortified cities; they were able to put the enemy formations to flight; they annexed whole provinces. After this rapid campaign the conquerors divided the country between them, deciding by drawing lots in which part of it each tribe should settle.

Thus to the former Canaanite organization there succeeded a new civilization, that of the Israelites, who occupied the conquered territory.

The historical reality is very different. By making use of the various indications scattered about in Numbers, Joshua and, better still, by reading the Book of Judges carefully, we can see that Joshua's conquest of Canaan was very far from taking place as rapidly, triumphantly and completely as the writer of Deuteronomy (seventh century) and the priestly narrator (sixth-fifth centuries) would have us believe. Contrary to what is related in the Book of Joshua, the Book of Judges show us the picture of a slow and very arduous penetration of the country. And we know too nowadays through archaeological discoveries that the settling of the Israelites in the country was incomplete and fairly limited. In fact, far from triumphantly ousting the inhabitants of Canaan the Israelites were glad in many cases to settle in isolated parts of the country and even in mountainous regions.

Generally speaking, Joshua may be regarded as one of the most active of those who effected the penetration of the Israelites into Canaan, but he was certainly not alone in this, despite the fact that the only accounts which have come down to us make him the hero. It must also be said here that the writer of Deuteronomy who, six centuries after the events described, composed the Book of Joshua had at his disposition very slender information. On the other hand, he needed a traditional, well-known figure to prove his point that Yahweh had showered blessings on the leader of Israel who had remained unwaveringly attached to the Law.

It can therefore be concluded that Joshua occupies a preponderant place in the history of Israel. But this must not prevent our showing a certain reserve concerning some of the campaigns (mentioned below) attributed to

this extraordinary warrior between 1200 and 1175 in Canaan.

The reader may be worried by the disparity between events as they actually happened and the account of them given either by Deuteronomy or the Book of Joshua. This can easily be explained.

The two books mentioned cannot be classed as historical works in the modern sense of the word. They form really a 'theology of history'. There was no question of the author recording the events of the past with meticulous care; quite simply he wanted to bring out clearly Yahweh's direct action in granting the Promised Land to his people. The writer illustrates and proves his thesis by carefully chosen examples.

It was important to show that the conquest was effected with lightning-like rapidity. This was necessary for the important moral lesson that Israel had to learn. It was not the time for writing an objective history of Joshua which might have disheartened the people; it was a matter of preserving their faith by a series of dynamic narratives.

This idea of a 'God of hosts', of a 'God of armies' leading his people against enemy tribes, waging a war of annexation and ordering massacres, obviously all belongs to the ancient Semitic religious background. It was a relic of barbarism and primitive savagery. In all remote periods man appears to have been fond of associating his deities with butchery, massacre and ritual murder. At the very time when the Israelites, on Yahweh's orders, proceeded to murder their enemies, we find the Babylonians worshipping Ishtar, the goddess who presided over merciless battles and pitiless massacres. We must remember that the Israelites were Semites of that period, region and race; they were not yet freed from this

need to kill and, ingenuously, they implicated their God.

What can be thought, too, of the practice of *herem*, that form of sacred and total extermination of the cities captured or the tribes that had been conquered? We find Joshua formulating this anathema against Jericho and later against other cities. It was in fact an old Bedouin custom; the whole population was put to death and their lives offered to the tribal deity of the conqueror. The flocks were killed and their bodies burned; the houses were torn down and destroyed by fire. It was formally forbidden to take the smallest object even as booty. This was an ancient military practice connected with the magic of war.

Thus we see the brutal conquest of Canaan, anathemas and curses hurled against the enemy, the merciless destruction of whole populations, and all willed and ordered by Yahweh. Obviously we can regard this historical viewpoint as a purely human phenomenon in which the help of Yahweh was requested by men whose minds were still very primitive. Nearer our own time the history of the Crusades provides even more dreadful examples of the same sort of thing. We find knights from the West, who after all had the advantage over the Israelites of acquaintance with the precepts of the Gospel, rushing into battle with the Saracens to kill them in the name of Christ.

To return to the Israelites in Joshua's time and the *herem*, it should be added that this systematic massacre of the Canaanites depicted in the Bible is, in reality, more literary than historical. In fact the victories of the Israelite troops were small in number, and in addition the wholesale massacring in the name of religion should not always be taken literally; frequently the putting to death of the 'king' (*sheik*) who had been taken prisoner symbolized the massacre of all his people.

### **Joshua: the Jordan campaign and the campaign in the centre**

The reader can obtain a general idea of Joshua's campaign by referring to the maps which illustrate this chapter; they will probably be clearer than a long description. Here only those historical events which require explanation will be dealt with.

#### **The Israelites cross the Jordan (Jos. 3: 1–17)**

The tribes of Israel, as was mentioned above, were on the plains of Moab. Opposite to them, but on the other side of the Jordan, stretched a great plain defended by the Canaanite citadel of Jericho. To cross the river and enter the Promised Land Joshua had the choice of two routes: either the ford generally used (on a level with Jericho) or, further to the north, another ford at the junction of the Jordan and the Wadi Fara, at a place where the valley narrowed.

Joshua decided to make for the Jericho ford, a decision which in the circumstances appeared to be a mistake. For it was then, as the Bible tells us, the *first month* (Jos. 4: 19) and the *harvest season* (Jos. 3: 15), that is, March–April, the time of year when the snow melts on Hermon, causing the Jordan to flood. In these circumstances it hardly seemed a suitable moment to cross the river.

The Canaanite garrison of Jericho seems to have assumed that the ford was impassable and did not attempt to defend it. They preferred to send a detachment to the north to guard the junction of the Jordan with the Wadi Fara.

Beyond all expectation Joshua made for the Jericho ford. And here, according to the Book of Joshua, there occurred a repetition of the miracle at the Sea of Reeds; upstream stood a wall of water where the river had

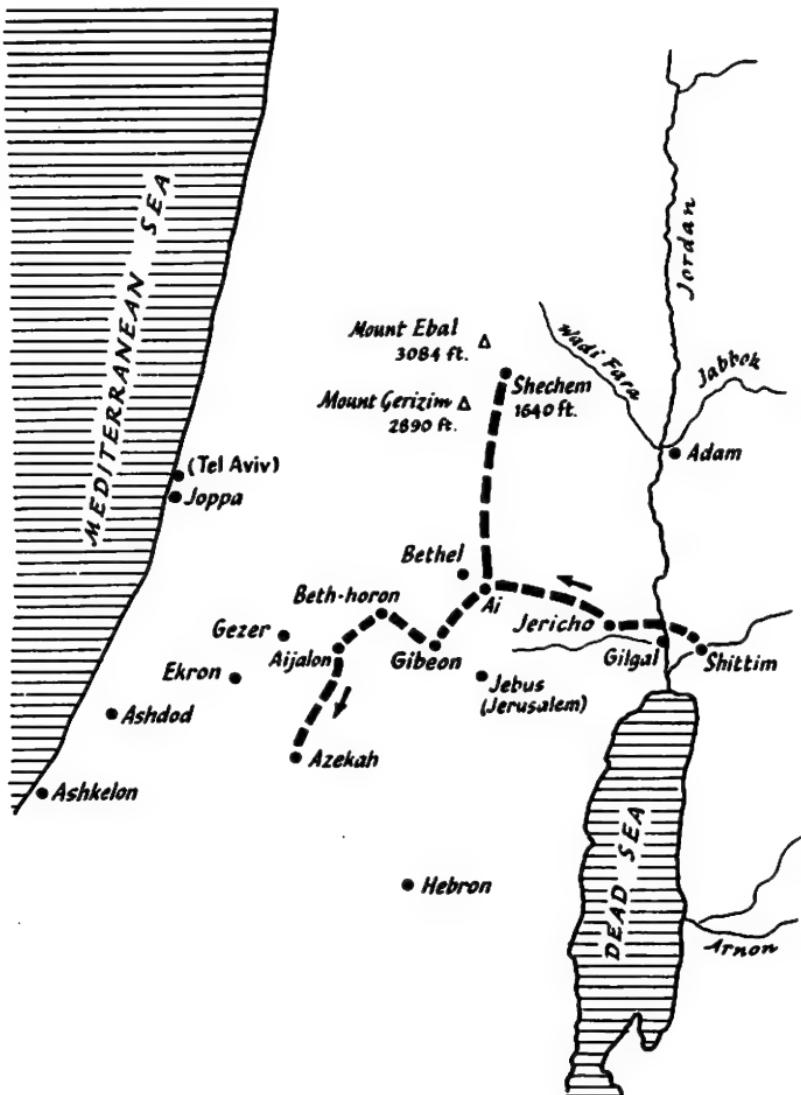
stopped flowing; the ark, carried by the priests, stood still in the centre of the dried up river bed of the Jordan: they *stood still on dry ground in mid-Jordan, and all Israel<sup>1</sup> continued to cross dry-shod till the whole nation had finished its crossing of the river.*

It is not the intention of this book to seek a logical or semi-scientific explanation for events in the Bible which appear to be of a supernatural character. It may be pointed out, however, that, upstream from the ford of Jericho the Jordan flows through a narrow gorge formed by limestone cliffs. Here the river is very confined and frequently, when it is in flood, these cliffs cave in; it has even happened that falling stone forms a barrage (as it is recorded to have done in A.D. 1267) large enough to block the river for a time. In this case the bed of the Jordan is dry downstream from the obstruction so long as the dyke formed higher up has not been submerged.

Directly after crossing the river Jordan Joshua established his fortified camp half-way between the Jordan and Jericho at Gilgal (called Galgala by some writers, probably the modern Kh. el-Etheleh). Three important events took place at Gilgal — the erection of twelve memorial stones, the circumcision of the Israelites and the Passover.

*The twelve memorial stones.* It is difficult to say where exactly these stones came from and what function they could have fulfilled during the crossing of the Jordan. It is very probable that these twelve menhirs, set up in a circle (archaeologists term these formations cromlechs; in the East the natives called them *hag Guilgal* 'the circle') stood in this place since Neolithic times.

<sup>1</sup> Three tribes, Reuben, Gad and a half of the tribe of Manasseh, had asked Moses for permission to remain in the good pastureland of Transjordania. He granted them permission on condition that their men of arms accompanied the other tribes across the river to help them establish themselves in Canaan (Jos. 1: 10-17).



## JOSHUA'S FIRST CAMPAIGN IN CANAAN (conquest of the centre)

- From Shittim to Jericho by way of Gilgal. Capture of Jericho.
- From Jericho to Ai; capture of Ai. Expedition to Shechem for the confirmation of the Covenant.
- From Gilgal (where Joshua established his camp) to Ai and then to Gibeon.
- Gibeon campaign, Beth-horon, Azekah.
- From Gilgal, expedition to Makkedah.

*Circumcision.* Why did this ritual ceremony take place on entering Canaan? Obviously the descendants of the patriarchs ought to have borne this sign on their bodies, at least according to ancient Yahwistic tradition. In fact, this custom does not appear to have been strictly followed, since Moses himself, as we saw, was never circumcized. It was only at the time of the Babylonian exile, when the Israelites came in contact with the Assyro-Babylonians and the Persians, nations which practised circumcision, that the Jews adopted it uniformly, as both a religious and racial mark, and as a distinctive sign of the Covenant between Yahweh and his people.

*The Passover.* It was observed, we read, at Gilgal on the 14th of the month of Nisan. A rule introduced at a later period laid down that no uncircumcized man should be present at the Passover meal. It is probably for this reason that a well-intentioned scribe placed the account of the circumcision of the Israelites by Joshua immediately before this Passover meal – there had not been another of the kind since Sinai. Thus all took place according to rule; the ritual commemoration of the departure from Egypt was celebrated by the circumcized.

### **The siege and capture of Jericho (see map, p. 180)**

This is an event which has caused much ink to flow. The Book of Joshua states that the crossing of the Jordan by the Israelites filled the population on the right bank of the Jordan with terror. On their arrival before the walls of Jericho, the citadel commanding the entrance to central Palestine, the Israelites at once made ready to lay siege to it. And the warlike ritual which they used further dismayed the Canaanites.

To begin with, once daily for the first six days the Israelites made a circuit of the city walls. At the head of

the procession marched the vanguard, then came seven priests blowing trumpets made of rams' horns. Behind them followed the ark, carried in triumph. Then, after the rearguard, came all the people, walking in silence.

From the ramparts above, the besieged Canaanites followed with terror the performance of this ritual whose meaning they understood perfectly. By this succession of magic circles the enemy God of hosts 'cut off' the city from all communication with the surrounding country; he isolated it; the city was thus dedicated to the deity carried in procession. This was the celebrated *herem*, known and applied in the East fairly often by invaders; it was the 'anathema', the ban, which signified the total destruction of the enemy, body and possessions, in honour of the tribal or national god who had deigned to grant victory to his faithful subjects.

And so they came to the seventh day (seven is a sacred number, the symbol of fullness, of wholeness). This time the procession went round the ramparts seven times. The priests blew their trumpets. At the end of the seventh circuit Joshua then turned to the people (who up to this moment had been ordered to keep silent) and commanded them: '*Raise the war cry!*' A great shout greeted this order. *The wall collapsed then and there. At once the people stormed the town, every man going straight ahead; and they captured the town. They enforced the ban on everything in the town: men and women, young and old, even the oxen and sheep and donkeys, massacring them all* (Jos. 6: 20–21).

The modern reader need not be astonished at the savage application of the ban, the *herem*, since all this, as was explained, was customary in ancient times in the East. But the collapsing of the walls of Jericho after the series of religious processions must be questioned closely.

This rather odd episode has been seen by some historians as the providential result of an earthquake at the precise moment. Others believe that the walls collapsed because they were undermined and the effect was carefully timed for the seventh day at the end of the seventh circuit. Unfortunately for these explanations, archaeologists appear to be unwilling to agree with the date of the collapse of the walls; it occurred, they say, well before 1200 B.C. The philologists may have the most likely explanation. It has already been pointed out that the Hebrew vocabulary is rather limited. Thus the substantive *homah* means, at the material level, 'rampart', 'defensive wall'; it also means garrison and, on the moral plane, can be translated as 'resistance'. The orientalist, therefore, can translate the word in several ways: the walls of Jericho fell down; or, the garrison surrendered; or, again, resistance collapsed, although some military groups from Jericho still continued the struggle for a certain time. In this last case, the threatening procession produced the desired effect.

Joshua continued his advance on Ai (*ha 'Ai*, the 'ruin': the still imposing ruins of a city destroyed several centuries previously, held by the people of Bethel). He appears to have been repulsed before finally storming this point with success. Next, he took Bethel. After these three military operations central Palestine lay wide open to the Israelite invaders who at once marched on Shechem.

### **The federation of Shechem (Jos. 8: 30–35; Deut. 27; see map, p. 180)**

In the valley of Shechem, where Abraham and then his grandson Jacob had formerly offered sacrifice to Yahweh (Gen. 12: 7; 35: 7), the Covenant was renewed and during the ceremony the unity of the twelve tribes of Israel was proclaimed. Joshua built an altar of rough

stones which were coated with lime; on the white surface of the sides were written the words of the Law. Then holocausts were offered and communion sacrifices.

The ark of the Covenant, surrounded by priests, was set up in the centre of the valley of Shechem (1625 feet above sea level) which is dominated to the north by Mount Ebal (3055 feet) and to the south by Mount Gerizim (2900 feet). Six tribes (Simeon and Levi, Juda and Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin) climbed the slopes of Gerizim, while the other six tribes (Reuben, Gad and Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali) took up their positions on Mount Ebal. From the depths of the valley arose the voices of the Levites chanting the twelve 'curses'.<sup>2</sup> To each of these precepts the tribes on Mount Ebal answered with a thunderous Amen. There followed the recital of the blessings (also, probably, twelve in number) also by the priests. This time it was the tribes posted on Mount Gerizim who responded with Amen. The curses and blessings constituted a summary of the clauses of the Covenant renewed by the Israelites on their entry into the Promised Land. As has already been mentioned, it is only after the federation at Shechem that the twelve tribes may properly be spoken of. Joseph's mummy, which had been carried all the way from Egypt was buried at Shechem.

### **End of the campaign in central Palestine (see map, p. 180)**

As the population of Gibeon (they were not Canaanites but Horites) obtained admission to the circle of Israel's allies by means of a clever trick, their city was not to be destroyed on this account. But the 'kings' (that is, the Amorite chieftains) of the region, who with justice were

<sup>2</sup> The curses were against anyone who had committed secret sins which the human eye was incapable of seeing but which God's justice could perceive and reach.

## **Joshua Establishes Israel in the Promised Land**

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alarmed by the Israelites' advance, decided to lay siege to Gibeon. Joshua who, on return from Shechem, had rejoined his fortified camp at Gilgal, hurried by forced marches to Gibeon, engaged the coalition of five kings in battle and put them to flight. He pursued them to Beth-horon and defeated several detachments at Makkedah and Azekah. During these battles a terrible hailstorm disorganized the five kings' retreat.

It was also at this time that Joshua performed his famous miracle – making the sun and the moon stand still. *Then Joshua spoke to Yahweh....Joshua declaimed:*

*'Sun, stand still over Gibeon,  
and, moon, you also over the Vale of Ayalon'.  
And the sun stood still, and the moon halted,  
till the people had vengeance on their enemies.*

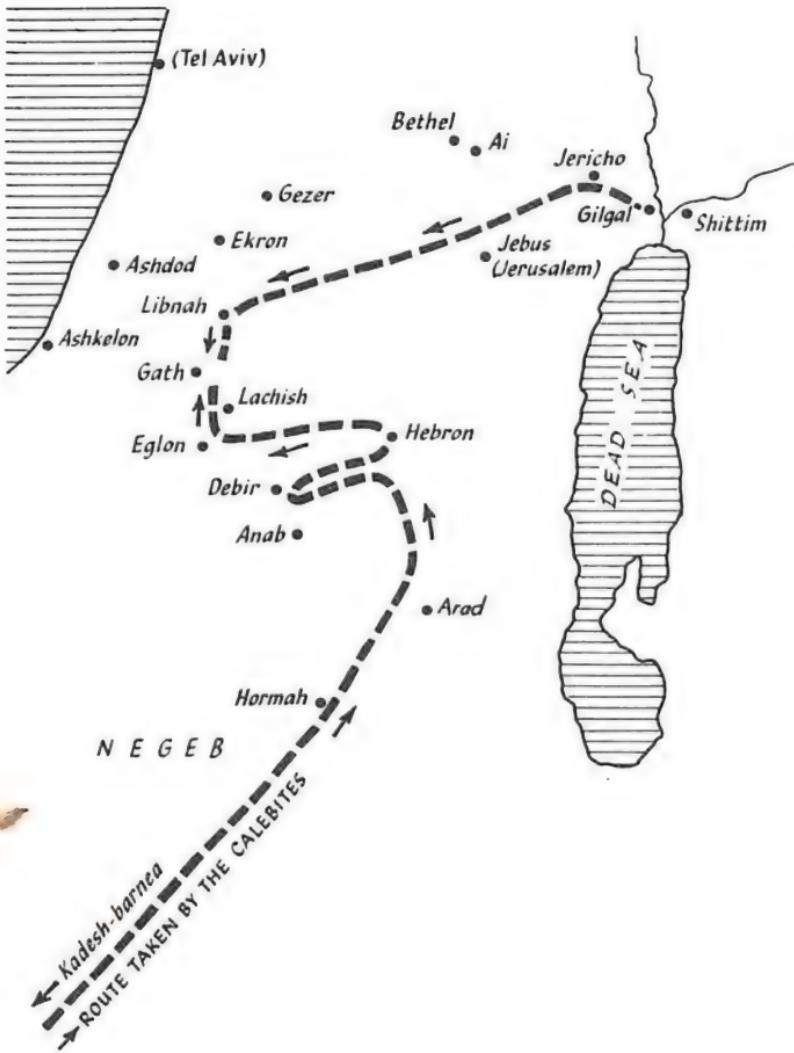
*Is this not written in the Book of the Just? The sun stood still in the middle of the sky.*

The Book of the Just, here alluded to by the writer, has not come down to us, but we know that this poem of past centuries was in epic form. And an unusual feature should be mentioned here. At this period writers were not accustomed to quote their sources, but here the author is careful to furnish a reference for this story: 'Is this not written in the Book of the Just?' Prudently, the writer does not wish to assume responsibility for such a statement. His position as an historian should be emphasized for it throws a curious light on the small credibility that he himself appears to give to the anecdote.

At all events, by this version the Israelite invasion had made its mark over the whole of the central part of the Land of Canaan.

### **Joshua: the conquest of the South**

The information furnished by the text of the Bible about this campaign is very fragmentary and only enables us to



## JOSHUA'S SECOND CAMPAIGN IN CANAAN (conquest of the south)

*Thick dotted line*, the route of the Calebites (from Kadesh to Lachish), a conquest later attributed to Joshua. This occupation of the south of the Promised Land was effected by certain tribes who had been able to march directly on Hormah, while the main body of Moses' troops were beaten back. When the Israelites, under Joshua's leadership, entered by way of Shittim, Gilgal and Jericho, the Calebites of the south joined up with the tribes of the centre. But these southern Israelites may never have been in Egypt.

*Thin dotted line*, the presumed route of the Israelites towards the southern clans (Calebites).

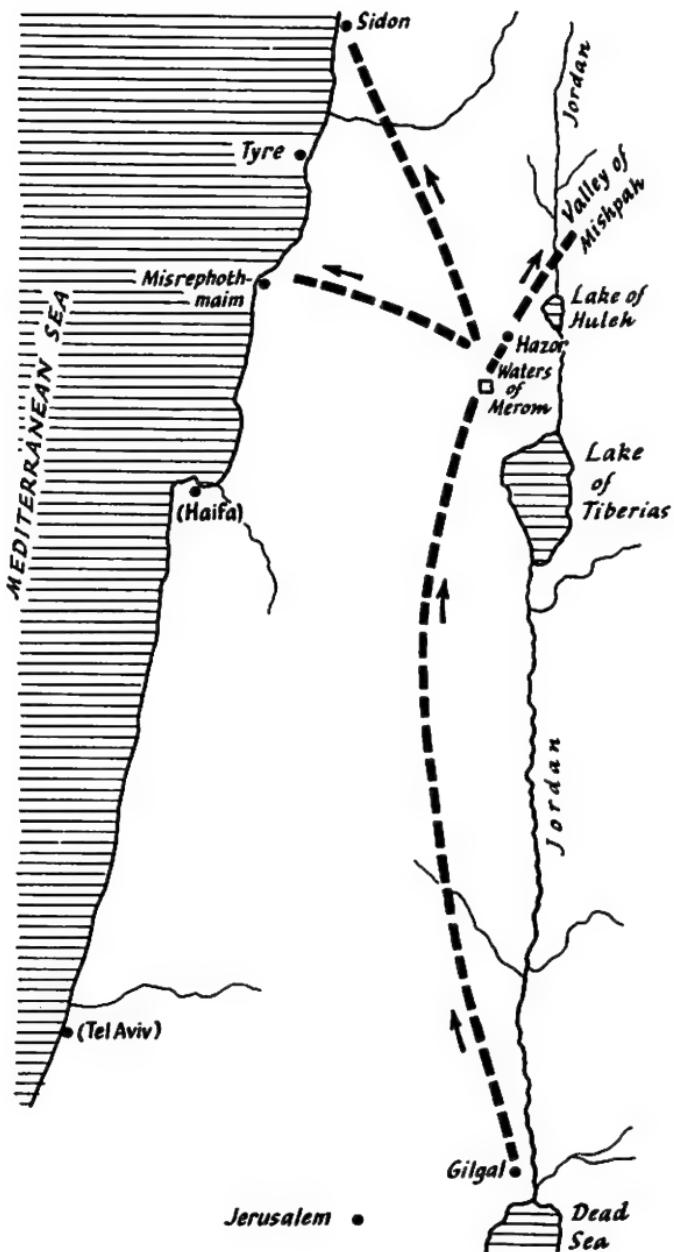
trace the course of events very approximately.

It is very probable that in the southern part of the country Joshua encountered a section of the Israelites; more fortunate than the main body of Moses' troops, they had been able to effect an entry and this had allowed them to settle for some decades at Hormah. These small groups of Israelites were probably under the leadership of Judah and Simeon. It is even possible that certain clans of Israelites had never left the south of Palestine, even at the time of the almost general migration of Egypt. *Joshua, the Bible tells us, subdued the whole land: the highlands, the Negeb, the lowlands, the hillsides, and all the kings in them. He left not a man alive and delivered every single soul over to the ban.* . . . This part, of course, is a theological development, as was explained above. We shall probably be right in saying that there were a few skirmishes, and that some Israelite tribes settled, somewhat precariously, in the southern region.

### **Joshua: the conquest of the North**

Jabin, the king of Hazor, worried by the presence of the Israelites in the land of Canaan, busied himself in forming a coalition to thrust these foreigners back to the other bank of the Jordan. The allies met *at the waters of Merom*, a place whose exact location has been much discussed: possibly it was in the hills running down to Lake Huleh. Joshua, forestalling the attack, fell upon his enemies unawares and cut them to pieces. Then he seized the city of Hazor and delivered it to the ban. Archaeologists have found that at some time in the period 1220–1175 (end of the Recent Bronze Age) this city was sacked and burned down. The same is true of certain other cities of the south, as Debir, Lachish, etc.

The vanquished army was pursued by the Israelites to the north as far as Sidon, about sixty-five miles from the



### JOSHUA'S THIRD CAMPAIGN IN CANAAN (conquest of the north)

It appears that this was effected at a later date and was due to another leader (see Judges, chapters 4-5).

battlefield; to the west as far as Misrephoth-maim, and to the east as far as the valley of Mishpah.

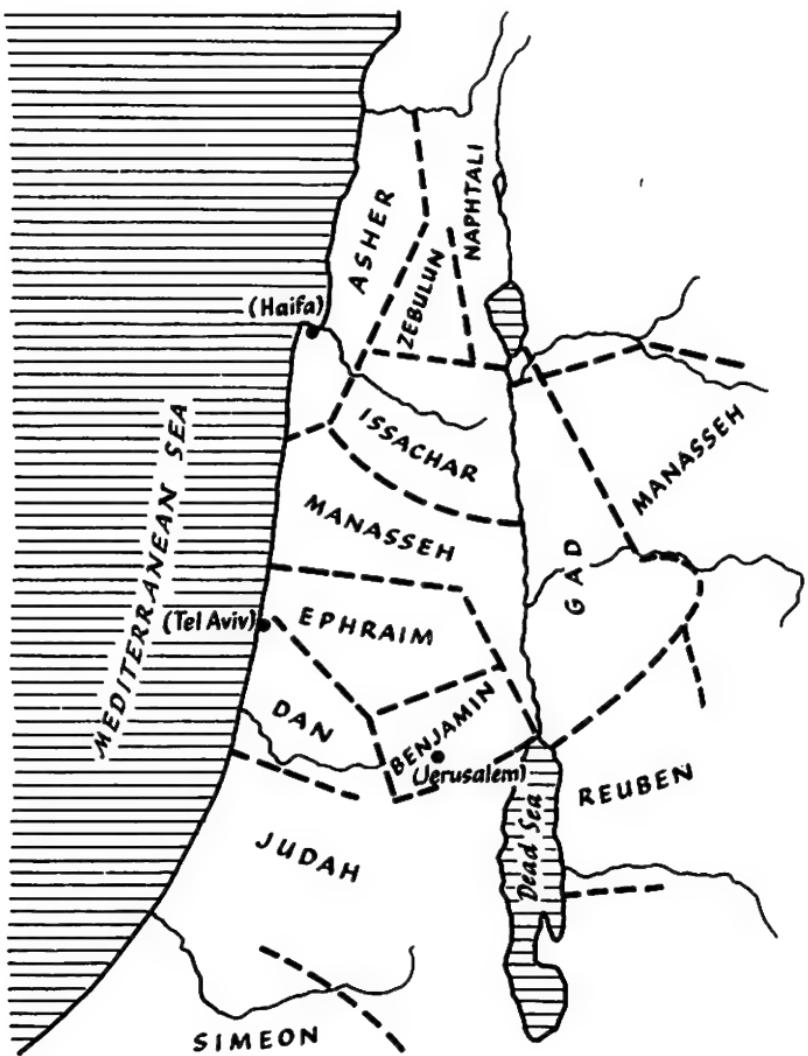
### **Joshua and the division of the Promised Land (see map on following page)**

Chapters 13–22 of the Book of Joshua give us very circumstantial details of the 'division' of the Promised Land among the various tribes of Israel. Following these indications a schematic map has been drawn. This geographical presentation can hardly fail to surprise the reader after what has been said of the very partial and incomplete conquest of the country. It was emphasized that the groups of Israelites had settled for better or worse—and mostly for worse—generally in the poorest regions of the country, whereas the map shows a country divided with all the rigour of a modern political partition, each sector displaying proudly the name of a son or a grandson of Jacob's, as if they were ruling over a conquered country which had been annexed and belonged to them.

It should be explained that this view of the matter is an entire anachronism. The seventh-century Deuteronomist writer, relying on inadequate documents, reconstructed the division of the country, effected at the beginning of the twelfth century. In this work of compilation biblical scholars have identified documents which must go back to the time of King David (about 1000); at that time the unity of Israel was a recently accomplished fact, and the scribe believed that this work should be attributed to Joshua. A second source, nearer still to the final form of the text, dates from the reform of Josiah (king of Judah 640–609) when Judah was divided into twelve provinces. With the aid of these two documents the author has endeavoured to reconstruct the political state of Israel after Joshua's 'conquests'. In addition this last account

## Moses and Joshua, Founders of the Nation

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**ESTABLISHMENT OF THE TWELVE TRIBES IN CANAAN (about 1175)**

was revised again later on. It is obvious what 'historical' result was obtained from all this. Nevertheless, the documents used are fairly old and the traditions of the tribes, very particular on this point, are not without their value.

Despite the map, which is purely traditional, it must be repeated that at the death of Joshua the Israelites remained scattered throughout the territory. They accepted the poorest land and tried to settle without attracting the attention of the Canaanite overlords.

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## HISTORICAL CONCLUSIONS

The entry of the Israelite tribes into Canaan, modest enough in its way, occurred in 1200–1180. The account of it given in the Bible is literary and theological, but it is dealing with events which were certainly historical. Sometimes the Israelites had to fight hard to be able to settle in territory which was often second rate. But we can be sure that there were also instances of cunning infiltration. In the end each group contrives to make a place for itself on the map of Canaan, either side by side with, or on the fringes of the native population. Yet two centuries after these events we find David, triumphantly seated on his throne as king of Israel, governing the Promised Land, formerly the land of Canaan, as absolute ruler.

1200 to 1000 B.C.: a mere two centuries. How can this rapid change in the history of the Israelites be explained?

The Old Testament furnishes the explanation for this extraordinary transformation: it is Yahweh, the protecting God of the twelve tribes who has enabled his people to attain a political unity crowned with spiritual glory and with the seeds of a royal messianism.

A historian, by definition, is not a theologian, but he may perhaps be allowed to state his opinion. The magnificent result is to be explained by the dynamic,

## Historical Conclusions

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fervent faith which, from Joshua to David (to confine ourselves to the period mentioned) filled the hearts of the Israelites; it was a faith which had unbounded confidence in the divine promises. The Israelites were sure that the God of their fathers, the God who spoke to Abraham and Moses, would lead the Chosen People to its great destiny.

The people of Canaan, with whom the Israelites were in contact, worshipped the cosmic forces and adored deities symbolizing the phenomena of nature — those responsible for the renewal of the seasons, procreation, the harvest. The religion of Israel was very different. Through it the Israelites were invincibly attached to the one God, the holy God, the invisible God, who laid down moral obligations, who inserted himself into the whole scheme of human salvation and asserted himself as the almighty maker of history. By this one factor it can be felt that Israel was already on the winning side — always provided that it remained faithful to this God.

From Joshua to David: two centuries.

Historically it is a triptych: Judges, Samuel, Saul and David.

But David certainly dominates all this period which seems to be preparing for the realization of the earthly Jerusalem. Two eventful centuries, of great interest, filled with colourful history, and rich in lessons and revelations. It is this period which we now enter in the next volume.

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## INDEX OF NAMES

---

- Aaron 19, 21, 48, 51, 52, 56, 57, 58, 60, 62, 65, 66, 68, 91, 97, 98, 109, 113, 119, 123, 127, 128, 129, 130, 133, 136, 137, 144, 147, 152, 160  
Aaronite 147 *n.*  
Abel (Fr F.M.) 80  
Abihu 129  
Abiram 147 *n.*  
Abraham 1 *n.*, 5, 7, 12, 14, 19, 27, 29, 34, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42 *n.*, 45, 46, 54, 98, 99, 101, 121, 122, 166, 167, 169, 172, 183, 193  
Aholiab 128  
Akenaton 18  
Akki 17, 18  
Amalek 96, 158  
Amalekite 96, 97, 142, 170  
Amenophis IV 18  
Amosis 55  
Amram 14, 19  
Apis 124  
Aramean 1 *n.*, 30  
Aristeus 44 *n.*  
Asher 132, 184  
Asiatic 13, 75  
Asshur 158  
Assyro-Babylonian 181  
Babylonian 153, 176  
Bacchus 16  
Balaam 156, 157, 158, 159  
Balak 156, 157, 158, 159  
Benjamin 132, 184  
Bezalel 128  
Bithiah 19 *n.*  
  
Caleb 141, 142, 146  
Canaanite 2, 55, 142, 146, 172, 177, 181, 182, 184  
Cazelles (Fr) 23, 26  
Chosen People 100, 109, 120, 126, 134, 167, 168, 193  
Clement of Alexandria 22  
Cozbi 160  
Cyrus II 17  
  
Dan 184  
Dathan 147 *n.*

## Index of Names

---

- David 189, 192, 193  
Dhorme E. 95  
  
Edom 150  
Edomite 75, 87, 152, 153,  
154, 158  
Egyptian 13, 25, 26, 40, 53,  
59, 60, 64, 70, 82, 84, 173  
Eleazar 152, 160, 170  
Eliezer 36, 49  
Eliphaz 96 *n.*  
Ephraim 96, 132, 140 *n.1*  
Esau 96 *n.*, 152  
Eusebius 19 *n.*  
  
Gad 131, 179 *n.*, 184  
Gershom 36, 49  
Gilgamesh 16  
Grollenberg (Fr) 80  
  
Hatti 54  
Hebrew 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 20,  
21, 30, 38, 40, 45, 46, 47,  
48, 50, 54, 55, 56, 58, 60,  
63, 66, 68, 70, 71, 74, 75,  
78, 80, 82, 84, 104, 146  
Hezekiah 154 *n.*  
Hittite 5, 9, 54 *n.*, 172, 173  
Hobab 34  
Hopni 21  
Horite 184  
Hosea 159  
  
Hoshea (Joshua) 96, 140 *n.1*,  
170  
Hur 21, 97  
Hyksos 2, 3, 5, 9, 53, 55,  
75, 172, 174  
  
Indo-European 2 *n.2*  
Isaac 5, 14, 19, 29, 38, 39,  
40, 41, 45, 46, 54, 98, 166  
Ishtar 17, 176  
Isis 16  
Islam 39  
Israel 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 20,  
28, 30, 61, 64, 67, 68, 83,  
87, 88, 97, 102, 104, 108,  
117, 120, 122, 123, 125,  
126, 130, 131, 135, 137,  
140, 152, 153, 157, 158,  
162, 163, 165, 167, 168,  
170, 174, 175, 178, 179,  
183, 189, 192, 193  
Israelite 2 *n.1*, 12, 29, 30,  
50, 51, 52, 55, 72, 75,  
79, 82, 84, 85, 89, 91,  
94, 95, 96, 98, 102, 126,  
127, 128, 130, 133, 135,  
136, 137, 141, 142, 145,  
146, 149, 152, 153, 154,  
156, 157, 159, 161, 163,  
164, 165, 168, 170, 172,  
173, 174, 175, 176, 177,  
179, 181, 187, 189, 191,  
192, 193  
Issachar 131, 133, 184

## Index of Names

---

- Jabin 187  
Jacob-Israel 1 *n.*, 2, 3, 5, 7,  
13, 14, 19, 26, 28, 37, 38,  
39, 40, 41, 42 *n.*, 43 *n.*,  
45, 46, 54, 55, 74, 85, 98,  
102, 110, 121, 158, 166,  
168, 183, 189  
Jehoshua (Joshua) 96, 170  
Jephunneh 146  
Jerahmeelite 146  
Jeremiah 2 *n.1*  
Jesus 14, 71  
Jethro 28, 33, 34, 35, 36,  
37, 49, 50, 97, 98  
Jew 2 *n.1*, 132, 181  
Jochebed 14, 19, 46  
Joseph 2, 9, 14, 40, 54, 55,  
74, 75, 98, 184  
Josephus 19 *n.*, 20, 22,  
162 *n.2*  
Joshua 96, 97, 109, 124,  
131, 140 *n.1*, 141, 142,  
146, 163, 170–191, 193  
Josiah 189  
Judah 2 *n.1*, 131, 133, 184,  
187  
Kehat 14  
Kenite 32, 35, 146, 158  
Kenizzite 146  
Keturah 27, 29, 98  
Kohathite 147 *n.*  
Korah 147, 148  
Leah 2 *n.1*  
Levi 14, 19, 125, 130, 131,  
147 *n.*, 184  
Levite 129, 130, 131, 133,  
147, 184  
Libyan 38, 53  
Linant Bey 81  
Lot 154  
Manasseh 132, 179 *n.*  
Manetho 21, 22, 25, 26  
Medusa 16  
Meoris 19 *n.*  
Meneptah 38, 52, 53, 54,  
55, 56, 60, 61, 66  
Midian 29  
Midianite 28, 30, 32, 35, 75,  
161  
Miriam 18, 19, 21, 84, 87,  
136, 137, 147  
Moabite 87, 154, 158, 159  
Moses 2, 8, 14, 15, 16, 17,  
18, 19, 20, 21 ff.  
Mosheh 20  
Nadab 129  
Naphtali 132, 184  
Nephthys 16  
Noah 101  
Nun 96, 140 *n.1*  
Og 156, 158

## Index of Names

---

- On 147 *n.*
- Osiris 7
- People of God 30, 67, 108, 109
- People of the Covenant 40
- People of the Sea 12, 14, 53, 150, 158, 172, 173
- Perseus 16
- Persian 181
- Philistine 78, 150, 172, 173
- Philo 20, 22
- Phineas 21
- Phinehas 160
- Ptolemy I 17
- Qehat 19
- Rachel 2
- Rameses II 1, 7, 8, 9, 19, 25, 37, 38, 52, 53, 56
- Rameses III 150, 173
- Reuben 131, 147 *n.*, 179 *n.*, 184
- Reuel (Rekkel) 34
- Romulus 17
- Salu 160
- Sanhedrin 22, 25
- Sarah 29
- Sargon I 16, 17, 18
- Semite 1 *n.*, 39, 42, 70, 172, 176
- Sheth 158
- Siegfried 17
- Sihon 156
- Simeon 131, 160, 184, 187
- Solomon 65, 85 *n.3*, 111, 112
- Steinmann (Abbé) 162 *n.1*
- Stephen 22, 25
- Syarru-Kin 17
- Termuthis 19 *n.*
- Timna 96 *n.*
- Tohenu 54
- Twelve Tribes of Israel 1 *n.*, 2 *n.1*
- Zebulun 131, 133, 184
- Zeus 16
- Zimri 160
- Zipporah 34, 36, 49, 50, 97, 136
- Zur 160

## INDEX OF PLACES

---

- Abarim (mountains) 166  
Abu Simbel 8  
Ai 183  
Ain Howara 91  
Ain Kudrah 136  
Ain Qadeis (Kadesh) 137  
Akhetaton 18  
Alexandria 22, 44 *n.*  
Alush 95  
Ammon 154  
Aqaba (Gulf of) 30, 32, 36,  
    153  
Aqadu 17  
Arabah (valley of) 153  
Arabia 1 *n.*, 38, 81, 137  
Arnon (river) 154  
Ascalon 54  
Asia 13, 84, 172  
Avaris 9  
Ayalon (Vale of) 185  
Azekah 185  
  
Baal-peor 159  
Baal-zephon 79, 80  
Babylon 17, 50, 65, 113  
Bamoth-baal 157  
  
Bashan 156  
Beersheba 56, 79, 95, 150  
Bene-jaakan 153  
Bethel 183  
Beth-horon 185  
Beth-peor 167  
Bitter Lakes 75, 78, 79, 80,  
    81, 84  
  
Canaan 1 *n.*, 2, 3, 8, 14, 25,  
    30, 32, 40 *n.5*, 47, 52, 53,  
    54, 56, 75, 78, 79, 85 *n.2*,  
    87, 94, 110, 121, 131,  
    137, 140, 141, 142, 145,  
    146, 147, 149, 150, 152,  
    153, 154, 156, 161, 165,  
    170, 172, 173, 174, 175,  
    176, 177, 179 *n.*, 181, 185,  
    187, 192, 193  
Coele-Syria (Valley of) 140  
    *n.2*  
Dan 166  
Dead Sea 16, 30, 150, 153,  
    154, 156  
Debir 187  
Delta (of the Nile) 1, 2, 3, 5,

## Index of Places

---

- 7, 8, 9, 12, 16, 23, 26, 32,  
38, 40, 47, 49, 51, 52, 53,  
55, 56, 60, 73, 74, 78,  
150, 166  
**Dophkah** 95
- Ebal (Mount)** 184  
**Eber** 158  
**Edom** 153  
**Egypt** 2, 3, 9, 10, 13, 17 *n.2*,  
20, 22, 23, 25, 26, 32, 33,  
38, 40, 41, 46, 47, 49, 50,  
52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59,  
61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68,  
71, 72, 73, 74, 78, 82, 85,  
91, 96, 98, 104 *n.3*, 106,  
110, 113, 132, 133 *n.*,  
137, 142, 143, 145, 146,  
149, 150, 162, 163, 167,  
170, 173, 181, 184, 187
- Elim** 91  
**Ephraim** 166  
**Etham** 75, 78, 79, 80  
**Etham (wilderness of)** 3, 89,  
91  
**Ethiopia** 33, 59  
**Euphrates** 16, 17, 30, 33, 157  
**Ezion-geber** 137, 153
- Fertile Crescent** 1 *n.*, 18, 30,  
33, 36  
**Field of Spies** 158
- Gaza** 78, 137  
**Gerizim (Mount)** 184  
**Gezer** 54  
**Gibeon** 184, 185  
**Gilead** 166  
**Gilgal (Kh. el-Etheleh)** 179,  
181, 185  
**Goshen (Gessen)** 3, 5, 8, 9,  
12, 26, 37, 38, 47, 49, 51,  
54, 55, 56, 61, 74, 78, 80,  
98
- Haran** 28, 121  
**Hashmonah** 153  
**Hattushash (Boghaz-Keni)**  
54  
**Hat-Varit** 9  
**Hazeroth** 136, 137  
**Hazor** 187  
**Hebron** 3, 14, 56, 121, 140,  
141  
**Heliopolis** 9, 21, 25, 26  
**Hermon (Mount)** 178  
**Heshbon** 156  
**Hor (Mount)** 152  
**Horeb** 36, 39, 47, 51, 58, 89,  
95, 97, 99, 102, 105, 109,  
122  
**Hor-haggidgad** 153  
**Hormah** 143, 146, 187
- India** 2 *n.2*
- Israel** 21, 54, 56

## Index of Places

---

- Jabbok 2 *n.1*, 43 *n.*, 154  
Jebel Katerin 100  
Jebel Musa 39, 95, 100  
Jebel Serbal 100  
Jebel Serbal 100  
Jericho 146, 166, 177, 178,  
179, 181, 182, 183  
Jerusalem 65, 132 *n.12*, 153,  
193  
Jerusalem (Temple of) 85  
*n.3*, 111, 154  
Jordan 30, 173  
Jordan (river) 156, 159, 160,  
165, 172, 178, 179, 181,  
187  
Judea 132  
Judah 166, 189  
Judah (mountains of) 55  
  
Kadesh 78, 79, 96, 133 *n.*,  
134, 135, 137, 140, 141,  
143, 146, 147, 148, 150,  
153, 162 *n.1*, 170  
Karnak (Temple of) 8  
Kehelathah 137  
Kibroth-hattaavah 136  
  
Lachish 187  
Laish-Dan 140 *n.2*  
Lake Huleh 187  
Lake Manzala 78  
Lake of Asphalt 16  
  
Lebanon 140 *n.2*  
Libya 32, 54  
  
Makkedah 185  
Mamre (Oak of) 99, 121  
Manasseh 166  
Marah 91  
Memnon 54  
Meribah 143, 144, 145  
Meribath-kadesh 144  
Merom 187  
Mesopotamia 22, 106, 110,  
157, 173  
Midian 27, 28, 29, 33, 34,  
36, 49, 51, 56, 81, 157  
Misrephoth-maim 189  
Mizpah 189  
Moab 154, 156, 157, 159,  
161, 162 *n.1*, 163, 166,  
167, 178  
Moreh (Oak of) 121  
Moseroth 152  
  
Naphtali 166  
Nazareth 14  
Nebo (Mount) 135, 163, 166  
Negeb 95, 145, 146, 166,  
187  
Nile 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13,  
15, 16, 24, 26, 32, 38, 52,  
53, 55, 58, 59, 60, 64, 78,  
115, 121, 149, 173  
Nubia 8

## Index of Places

---

- Paddan-aram 122  
Palestine 1 *n.*, 2, 32, 40 *n.4*,  
53, 54, 55, 75, 134, 140,  
143, 145, 166, 167, 181,  
183, 184, 187  
Paran (desert of) 78, 133,  
134, 135, 140  
Pass of Hamoth 140  
Peor (Mount) 158, 159  
Per-Aton 9  
Pethor 157  
Pi-hahiroth 79, 80  
Pi-Rameses 9, 40, 60  
Pithom 5, 9, 12  
Pisgah (Mount) 156, 158,  
160, 166  
Promised Land 8, 96, 121,  
126, 133 *n.*, 135, 140, 142,  
144, 145, 152, 153, 154,  
156, 160, 161, 165, 172,  
173, 176, 178, 189, 192  
  
Qantir 78, 80  
  
Rameses 9, 12, 37  
Ramesseum 8  
Red Sea 30, 32, 33, 78, 80,  
81, 82, 83, 87, 100  
Rehob (Beth-rehob, Beit-  
Rohob) 140  
Rephidim 95, 99, 170  
Rissah (el-Kuntilla) 137  
Rome 17  
  
Sea of Reeds 74, 80, 82, 83,  
85, 89, 91, 153, 178  
Sea of Suph (Red Sea) 142  
Seir (Mount) 150, 152  
Serabit el-Khadim 95  
Shechem 75, 121, 131, 183,  
184, 185  
Shur (wilderness of) 3, 89  
Sidon 187  
Sileh (el-Kantara) 78  
Sin (wilderness of) 91, 95,  
135  
Sinai 19, 28, 30, 32, 36, 37,  
38, 39, 40, 43 *n.*, 44, 45,  
46, 47, 49, 50, 51, 58, 66,  
74, 75, 81, 88, 89, 94,  
98, 99, 100–110, 113, 119,  
121, 123, 125, 126, 127,  
128, 132, 133, 135, 142  
*n.*, 145, 148, 149, 162  
*n.1*, 163, 164, 168, 170,  
172, 181  
Spring of Moses (Ain Musa)  
91  
Succoth 78  
Sudan 59  
Sumer 106  
Sumeria 17 *n.2*  
Syria 30, 32, 35, 53  
  
Tamari 54  
Tanis 78  
Tel el-Amarna 18, 24  
Thebes 8, 26, 54

## **Index of Places**

---

- Transjordania 154, 156, 159,  
161, 179 *n.*
- Two Rivers (Valley of) 107
- Uruk 16
- Wadi Aleyat 95
- Wadi Arnon 154
- Wadi Fara 178
- Wadi Feiran 95
- Wadi Gharandel 91
- Wadi Refayid 95
- Wadi Tumilat 3, 8, 9, 78,  
104 *n.3*
- Wadi Zered 154
- Yanu'an 54
- Zin (wilderness of) 137, 143
- Zoar 166

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